A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE: ELECTION MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine the performance of the Electoral Commission (IEC) of South Africa. The analysis not only confines itself to the 2011 local government elections, but also examines how the IEC, through the use of a Voter Participation Survey (VPS) and an Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS), has been evaluated by the voters over the past local government elections. Results from these surveys show overwhelming endorsement of the Electoral Commission alongside noteworthy generally positive attitudes regarding voting intention. However, despite the positive findings, signs of a growing sense of political disillusionment are evident among South Africans. The article examines some of the reasons for the disillusionment, places it in an international context where political values are changing, and also suggests ways for the IEC to address it going forward.

INTRODUCTION

Holding regular elections has long been viewed as essential for the consolidation and affirmation of democracy. However, it is electoral integrity and credibility, rather than the mere running of elections that contribute to the achievement of representative and accountable institutions (Birch nd; Mozaffar 2002). Building public trust in the validity of elections also has the potential to translate into greater confidence in the political system as a whole (Atkeson & Saunders 2007:656; Birch nd:2), and into a more robust civic commitment to and participation in democratic processes such as elections. It may thus be argued that effective, efficient and transparent electoral management, which impacts on electoral credibility, is integral to establishing and sustaining a healthy and vibrant democracy. This responsibility often falls to an Electoral Management Body (EMB). In South Africa, the Electoral Commission (IEC), a permanent, independent and impartial body, has been tasked to administer and ensure credible, free and fair elections.

The first part of the article provides theoretical background to the role of EMBs and their salience in promoting election quality and legitimacy. This is followed by a brief examination of electoral management since 1994, with emphasis on the role of the Electoral Commission. This is followed by a national-level assessment of public perceptions of core aspects of both the pre-election phase as well as the Election Day experience. Drawing on these results, we use the data to reflect on some elements that may need to be considered in planning for future elections if the gains in public confidence are to be further consolidated. The final section presents some concluding thoughts emanating from the public assessment of electoral management in the context of the 2011 local government elections.

ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES AND ELECTION QUALITY

Elections are prerequisites of democracy (Mesfin 2008; Huntington 1993:9-10). It is the primary channel through which citizens choose and remove their political leaders, granting them authority while at the same time keeping them accountable. For the majority of citizens, it is the only means of participating in the governance of their country. There is therefore broad consensus among the international community that elections must be free and fair. These notions touch on the fundamental principles that frame democratic theory and practice. Failing to uphold these standards in the process of electing representative leaders brings into question the capacity for good governance in general (Pottie 2001:133).

Most democratic countries today have an established, independent commission (otherwise called an Electoral Management Body (EMB)) to take on the responsibility of conducting elections (López Pintor 2000:20; Birch nd:3). Often the existence of such a body is thought to ensure the legitimacy of elections (Birch nd; López Pintor 2000; Aparicio & Ley 2008). Berouk Mesfin (2008:3) even goes so far as to argue that the electoral commission is the most important institution determining whether an election results in a peaceful handover of power or in conflict and instability.

Although the structural and functional designs of electoral commissions vary, the core principles and basic mandate of these bodies are the same: to be independent, impartial and transparent (African Union 2002:3; African Union 2007:7). The IEC of South Africa is no exception. These principles guide the work of the commission and underpin the integrity, freeness and fairness of the electoral process as a whole. However, it is in performing its functional duties that the commission must realise these core principles. It therefore becomes imperative to understand the administrative work of EMBs.

The basic functions of an electoral commission encompass all aspects of administering and overseeing elections. An issue oft-neglected by political scholars, commentators and practitioners alike, the complexity of this logistical enterprise is in

part due to the critical import of seemingly minor decisions. The number of ballot papers printed, the kinds of ballot boxes, security seals and marking ink used, as well as the number of voting stations provided are but a few examples of the kinds of salient issues that impact on the efficiency and credibility of the electoral process (Maphunye 2010:60; Goodwin-Gill 2006:152). As Birch (nd:3) explains, these administrative functions form part of a commission's "enabling function in that they establish the practical framework in which a credible election can take place".

An election managing body such as the IEC is often also responsible for overseeing the electoral process as a whole. This supervisory function requires that the commission monitor the activities and interactions of the relevant actors (Birch nd:3). To this end it must keep political parties accountable to the law and must act as referee between contesting parties (February 2009:48, 59). It is also part of the commission's supervisory task to prevent or otherwise identify fraudulent behaviour and irregularities, as well as the occurrence of intimidation, coercion, and violence. In the African context, the inability to prevent misconduct or manage disputes may disrupt the general running of elections and even result in violence (Maphunye 2010:60). Thus it is the duty of the election management body to resolve disputes and to respond to election-related complaints (Aparicio & Ley 2008:1). The ability to successfully fulfil its supervisory function and to effectively respond to diverse issues and competing concerns validates the independence and impartiality of the EMB.

Alongside the managing and monitoring of elections, the IEC must prepare the electorate for the elections through rigorous and informative education programmes and communication networks. It is the job of the commission to teach the citizenry how the electoral system operates and what the registration and voting procedures entail (Birch nd:3). Increased voter knowledge, as well as improved access to information, should further engender confidence in the electoral system (ibid.).

Although the challenges accompanying such a broad mandate are multifarious, paying attention to election infrastructure logistics, voting procedures, staff capacity and civic education is essential for effective and efficient election management. A well-functioning election not only confirms the credibility thereof, but may also enhance voter intention and actual voter turnout. Barriers to voter turnout, for example, may be addressed through operational changes to the registration and election processes. This has been confirmed by analysis of the effects of election reforms in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as of more recent election administration reforms in the United Kingdom between 2000 and 2007 (James 2011:38). Finally, a well-functioning election legitimises the results of the voting process, thereby affirming the significance of each individual citizen going to the polls and casting his or her vote.

Of course, election administration is not the only important determinant of voter turnout or of the credibility of elections (Pottie 2001; James 2011). Every election is shaped and influenced by distinct and peculiar factors within its particular context of

time and space. Nevertheless, proper management of elections remains a key ingredient and points to the core mandate and capacities of an EMB in general, and of the IEC of South Africa in particular.

ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

The Electoral Commission (IEC) of South Africa is a Constitutional body specifically mandated to fulfil the aforementioned functions "without fear, favour or prejudice" (February 2009:58). Provisionally formed in 1994 and permanently established in 1998, the IEC has played a critical role in securing democracy in post-apartheid South Africa. The work of the IEC extends beyond the administration of local, provincial and national elections. It also works with and mediates between political parties, adjudicates disputes, promotes voter education and reviews electoral legislation (López Pintor 2000:41). Although an independent body, it is accountable to the National Assembly.

Tracking the work of the IEC from 1994 onwards, Maphunye (2010) identifies a steady improvement in the management capacities and processes of the commission. Moreover, the general acceptance of election results since 1994 may be indicative of the success of election management in ensuring free and fair elections (Maphunye 2010:58). This is especially noteworthy given the distinct and shifting challenges of the South African electoral context.

In 1994, for example, the management of elections proceeded largely by way of *ad hoc* decision-making and trial and error on the part of the IEC (Maphunye 2010:58). This was in part due to the lack of a "comprehensive national voters' roll, [and] other logistical systems or properly trained personnel to run the elections", which was further accompanied by violent tensions and anxieties surrounding Election Day (ibid.). Although the 1994 election was widely praised as being a success, it also served to illuminate the electoral management challenges that needed to be addressed. Preparations for the 1999 elections thus included, among others, the establishment of a common voter's roll and the introduction of an Electoral Code of Conduct (Pottie 2001:147-8).

The Code of Conduct regulated party behaviour during the election period with the aim of reducing violence and intimidation and to ensure free and fair elections (ibid.). The IEC also formed party liaison committees and conflict management committees in order to further engage with and moderate party activities. Compared to the 1994 poll, the incidence of violence was considerably reduced in the 1999 elections (ibid.:148). Moreover, the number of election-related complaints submitted to the IEC fell from 3 558 in 1994 to 1 032 in 1999 (ibid.:143).

However, challenges to effective election management emerged in the voter registration process, which essentially became a controversial contestation over identification documents. When the IEC set the bar-coded identification docu-

ment as the procedural requirement for registration and voting, this was met with serious opposition and ultimately resulted in a politicised High Court case (Pottie 2001:137; Maphunye 2010:59). Nevertheless, the matter was resolved and the IEC, as Maphunye argues, has succeeded in institutionalising its electoral management infrastructure and activities. Between 2000 and 2006, improvements in efficiency and effectiveness may be largely attributed to the introduction of information technology (IT) to electoral management systems and processes (Maphunye 2010:59). The use of technology in the delimitation of voting districts, candidate nominations, election schedules, timelines and the results procedure signify another advance in the electoral system in South Africa.

Improvements in policy and legislation, as well as in the practical capacities of the IEC, have contributed to the entrenchment of regular democratic elections in South Africa. As the political landscape of South Africa matures, analyses of voter perceptions of the recent performance of the IEC can offer valuable insight into new challenges confronting and directing the work of the commission.

METHODOLOGY

The data employed to examine perceptions of electoral governance and legitimacy derive primarily from two nationally representative surveys conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council on behalf of the Electoral Commission of South Africa. Firstly, the 2010 Voter Participation Survey (VPS) was a study of 3 214 South African citizens aged 16 or older living in private households. Fieldwork for the study was undertaken in November and December 2010, six months prior to the 2011 Local Government Elections.

The primary objective of this study was to inform and guide the Commission in its plans, policies and practices. More specifically, the study endeavoured to evaluate voting behaviour in South Africa and to determine people's interest in, and perceptions of, the forthcoming local government elections, to assess the performance of municipal government, to examine the electoral and political involvement of specific groups such as women, youth and persons with disabilities and, finally, to evaluate public opinion of the IEC and measure people's trust in the Commission. Census Enumerator Areas (EAs) formed the primary sampling unit (PSU) of which 500 were selected throughout South Africa. In each of these areas, seven households were randomly selected for interviewing, followed by the random selection of one age eligible member in each household. Questionnaires were administered using face-to-face interviewing in the respondent's language of choice. A small qualitative component consisting of focus group discussions with special interest groups was also carried out, though these results are not reported.

The second data source used is the 2011 Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS), which was conducted on Election Day (18 May 2011) with the aim of determining

the perceptions and experiences of voters and election observers alike concerning the freeness and fairness of the electoral process. The study also focused on assessing the operational efficiency of the IEC in managing the municipal elections. A complex sample design was used in drawing the sample of voting stations. The design included stratification and a multi-stage sampling procedure. The database of voting stations obtained from the IEC was merged with that of Population Census Enumeration Areas (EAs).

The sampling of the voting station was done proportionally to the dominant race type, geo-type and the number of voting stations in a given province. This was to ensure that a nationally representative sample of voting stations was selected and the results of the survey could be properly weighted to the population of eligible voters in the country. At the actual voting stations, fieldworkers used random sampling to select voters to ensure a fair representation in terms of gender, race, age and disability status. A sample of 300 voting stations countrywide was selected. At each voting station, 50 voters were interviewed during the course of the day. These were divided into four time slots to ensure a fair spread of interviews over different times of the day, when different dynamics might have been in operation. They were requested to comment on various issues pertaining to the voting day.

The results of these surveys are used in the next section to analyse the efficiency of the IEC as an election management body.

PERCEIVED LEGITIMACY OF THE ELECTION MANAGEMENT BODY

Public confidence in political institutions has become a variable of increasing interest in studies of democratic performance in recent decades. This has largely been precipitated by a considerable, long-term trend in many advanced democracies across Europe and the USA towards increased scepticism and erosion of trust in politicians, political parties and central democratic institutions such as national parliaments (Norris 1999c, 2011; Dalton 2004; Bäck & Kestilä 2009). Schyns and Koop (2010:145) go as far as to state that: "A decline in political trust is generally seen as dysfunctional to democracy". Monitoring trends in relation to trust and confidence in political and social institutions therefore serves as a way of discerning state-citizen cohesion.

The combination of factors that interact to foster free, fair and credible elections is undeniably complex but it is rather evident that the institution governing core aspects of the electoral process has an important role to play in building credible elections (Birch, 2008). Confidence in the electoral process is therefore enhanced and strengthened by trust in the institution that governs the process – in the case of South Africa – the IEC. Trust in institutions was monitored by the HSRC's Evaluation of Public Opinion (EPOP) surveys between 1998 and 2001 and from 2003 to

2010 it was monitored by the South African Social Attitude Survey. The combined results are presented in Table 1 and portray how trust in the IEC and other selected institutions has changed over the course of more than a decade of democracy in South Africa.

Table 1: Trust in the political system and other social and political institutions, 1998-2010 (%)

Trust in:	'98	'99	'00	'01	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10
Political system												
National government	47	60	43	52	57	69	64	59	52	52	61	53
Your provincial government	41	50	34	..	52	63	59	54	..	..	..	46
Your local government	37	48	32	38	45	55	48	44	34	38	40	38
Parliament	..	..	..	..	57	65	59	55	46	48	56	49*
Political parties	30	39	29	27	..	..	42	37	27	29	34	29
Politicians	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	32	22	26	29	27
Social and political institutions												
Churches	82	81	74	81	84	81	81	82	82	83	84	77
The SABC	..	..	..		75	73	71	72	..	73	73	74
Electoral Commission (IEC)	..	54	49	63	63	69	65	68	..	67	72	73
Defence force	48	..	45	49	62	56	59	49	..	56	64	58*
Courts	42	45	37	45	50	58	56	52	49	50	57	55
Big business	56	55	39	43	57	55	53	56	..	..	..	..
The police	42	47	39	40	42	46	45	39	39	40	41	47
Trade unions	38	38	26	38	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	38

Note 1*: The reported percentages correspond to the percentage of South Africans aged 16 years and older who indicated that they 'strongly trust' or 'trust' in each of the following institutions in South Africa at the time of interview.*

Note 2: *Figures shaded in light gray indicate year-on-year improvements in trust, while figures in dark gray represent year-on-year declines in trust.*

Note 3*: the SASAS field rounds are conducted in the last quarter of each calendar year.*

Institutions have been classified into two broad clusters – one set pertaining to the core institutions of the political system, such as the three spheres of government, parliament, political parties and politicians, while the other focuses on a range of other social and political institutions. In terms of the movement over time, the results show a demonstrable improvement in public confidence in institutions between 1998 and 2004. However, in contrast to the preceding years, a worrisome

reversal in trust in virtually all major public institutions is noted from 2005, particularly those constituting the political system. Although some improvement is noted in 2008-2009, the general trend is that trust in institutions is markedly lower than in 2004. It is important to bear in mind that in many instances the levels of trust still remain above those reported in the late 1990s.

Over the decade, the majority of citizens (81% on average) have consistently and resolutely shown that they are most likely to express greatest confidence in religious institutions, such as churches. This is a typical pattern across sub-Saharan Africa. It is followed by trust in the national broadcaster, the SABC, which exceeded 70% between 2003 and 2010. The Electoral Commission has also received fairly healthy approval ratings, with majority support from about two-thirds of the adult population since 2001. The interesting thing to note about levels of trust in the IEC is that it had increased by 19% since 1999. In 1999 just more than half (54%) said they trusted the IEC but by 2010 almost three quarters (73%) of people stated that they trusted the IEC. This increase is the highest over time for all the institutions and reflects very positively on the IEC.

This result is a function of credibility being instilled by the IEC over the years. Not only does the general public trust the IEC, but the IEC also seems to be held in high regard by political parties who have congratulated the IEC "... for facilitating successful elections over the years (IEC 2007:39). Credible ratings such as this have been the outcome of various efforts by the IEC over the years of being responsive to demands, being proactive in catering for the needs of special groups, being innovative and open to the adoption and implementing of new technologies and being progressive. Some of the efforts are listed below.

VIEWS ON THE PRE-ELECTION PHASE

Voter education

The promotion of voter education is one of the duties and functions of the Electoral Commission, as stipulated in Section 5 of the Electoral Commission Act of 1996, and is critical to ensuring that voters are aware of their civic rights and responsibilities and have sufficient knowledge and understanding of electoral processes in order to be able to make informed choices during elections. To ensure this objective is progressively realised, it is accompanied by communication campaigns that aim to encourage South African citizens to register and participate in elections. Given the salience of these responsibilities to the Electoral Commission, the ESS survey questionnaire investigated public attitudes to the voter education campaigns and programmes that were carried out by the institution, as well as the reported utility of a range of information and communication sources in imparting voter education. With regard to the perceived effectiveness of the IEC's voter education efforts in relation to the 2011 local government elections, approximately

two-thirds (68%) of voters believed that the IEC's voter education was 'very effective', 22% indicated it was 'somewhat effective', with a nominal share declaring it ineffective or professing uncertainty.

Voter registration process

Like voter education campaigns, the voter registration process is considered a critical component of the pre-electoral phase for election management bodies such as the IEC, as well as for political parties. The number of South Africans registered on the Voters' Roll increased from 18.48 million for the 2000 local government elections to 23.66 million for the 2011 elections, representing an increase of 28% over the interval (IEC 2011). While to some extent this reflects population dynamics, it is also indicative of the efforts undertaken by the IEC together with other stakeholders to improve registration. Of those registered at the time of the 201 VPS, 76% of those aged 16 years and older (16-17 year-olds can register but not vote) indicated that they were registered, and among this group, an overwhelming majority (97.5%) reported that they found it easy to register. Only 2.2% found it difficult and the rest (less than 1%) were uncertain.

In order to understand barriers to voter registration, those who stated that they had no intention of registering soon were asked to furnish reasons. Almost three-quarters (74%) of those that say they are not interested in registering to vote cite disillusionment as the reason. They are either not interested in voting (59%) or not interested in any of the existing parties (15%). By contrast, administrative barriers accounted for fewer than 10% of responses while intimidation was cited by 4% of survey respondents. This finding illustrates that political disenchantment is becoming an increasingly salient motivating factor behind non-registration, especially relative to administrative issues such as the possession of an ID book or knowledge of the registration process. This points to the need for a stronger role for civic and democracy education in the future.

Political campaigning

The conditions required for free, fair and credible elections include tolerance by candidates and registered political parties during the process of conducting election campaigns. Approximately eight in every ten voters (81%) felt parties were 'very' or 'somewhat' tolerant of one another during campaigning for the 2011 local government elections, thus not infringing on their rights to choose a preferred candidate. Lower than average scores were reported in the Western Cape and formal urban areas.

ELECTION DAY EXPERIENCE

Overall evaluations of electoral freeness and fairness

Ensuring the delivery of free and fair elections not only represents a core component of the Electoral Commission's constitutional mandate, but it stands at the heart of the organisation's vision and mission statement. It is thus a testament to the electoral management performance of the IEC that the voting public was overwhelmingly confident that the 2011 local government elections were both free and fair (95% and 94% respectively), with problems being reported in only a minority of cases (Table 2). This viewpoint is broad-based, with no statistically significant differences evident on the basis of the age, population group, sex, disability status or educational level of voters. These findings are virtually identical to the response of voters interviewed during the 2009 national and provincial elections.

Table 2: South African perceptions of electoral freeness and fairness (%)

	2011 Local Government Elections	2009 National and Provincial Elections
Do you think that the election procedures were free?		
Yes, completely free	95	95
Yes, with minor problems	2	2
Not at all free	1	1
Don't know	2	2
Do you think that the election procedures were fair?		
Yes, completely fair	94	95
Yes, with minor problems	2	2
Not at all fair	1	1
Don't know	3	2
Did anyone try to force you to vote for a certain political party?		
Yes, before coming to the voting station	5	n.a
Yes, while waiting to vote	1	n.a
No, not at all	94	96

Note: The 2009 ESS report did not did disaggregate reported coercion according to whether it occurred while voters were at the voting station or beforehand, even though this data was collected.

Sources: HSRC Election Satisfaction Survey 2009, 2011.

A fundamental component in determining whether elections are free and fair is the absence or presence of coercion and intimidation (United Nations General

Assembly 1999). Recognising this, the ESS asked voters the following question: "Did anyone try to force you to vote for a certain political party?" On aggregate, 94% of the voting public reported that no one tried to force them to vote for a certain political party (Table 2). The remaining 6% declared that they had experienced coercion to vote for a specific political party – 5% prior to arriving at their voting station and 1% while waiting in a queue to vote. This is again an exceedingly positive result from an electoral management perspective. Of those having experienced coercion, political parties and family members or friends were the most commonly mentioned perpetrators (both 40%), followed to a much lesser extent by other voters and election officials.

Accessibility

The IEC places a strong emphasis on widening access to voters. In order to ensure this, the IEC has committed itself to continuous innovation, informed by research. Examples of this are ongoing research on voter preference in terms of voting day (on a public holiday, weekend or working day) and also on voting age. Regular investigations are undertaken into the patterns of participation of women, youth, persons with disabilities and different demographic groups.

Recognising that long queues and travelling distance are barriers to voter participation, the IEC established 20.859 voting stations countrywide for the 2011 local government elections. This constitutes an increase of 1 133 relative to the 2009 national elections. The 2011 local government elections also marked the first time that special voting was available to voters. This implied that if a voter was legible to vote and his/ her name appeared on the voters' roll, but could not vote on Election Day at the specific voting station, he/she qualified for a special vote. Special arrangements were also made for the physically infirm or disabled and the blind.

With regard to access to voting stations, voters interviewed on election day reported that it took them on average 17 minutes to reach their voting station (regardless of the mode of transport), with only a third indicating that it took them longer than 15 minutes. In terms of actual queuing, voters waited on average 23 minutes before casting their vote. On aggregate, 97% of voters were satisfied with the instructions and signs at voting stations. The vast majority could therefore successfully navigate to their assigned voting station and could also follow instructions inside the voting station.

In terms of the accessibility of voting stations to persons with disabilities and the elderly, 85% of voters declared the voting stations as 'very' or 'somewhat' accessible. Importantly, there were not significant age group differences and voters with disabilities were marginally more positive than those without disabilities, which reaffirms the favourable assessment.

Ease of voting procedures

In terms of electoral processes, there was near universal agreement (98%) that

the voting procedures inside the voting station – which include having your name checked on the voters' roll, having your ID stamped and thumb inked, being issued ballot papers, going to the voting booth and placing the ballot in the ballot box – were 'very' or 'somewhat' easy to understand.

Making provision for voters with special needs in voting procedures forms a prominent part of IEC electoral operations in accordance with the organisation's core values. For instance, IEC election officials were trained to allow disabled, pregnant, sick or elderly voters to move to the front of the queue at voting stations. Assisted voting was also permitted for voters with disabilities, which enabled them to select someone over 18 years (other than a political party agent) to aid them in the voting process. Moreover, the 2011 local government elections represented the first occasion that special voting was arranged, affording registered voters who were unable to travel to their voting station due to physical infirmity, disability or pregnancy to apply for a home visit. These procedures, coupled with the use of the Braille ballot template for the first time in local government elections in 2011, signify the ongoing priority attached to the participation of voters with special needs.

A considerable majority of voters recognised these efforts and acknowledged that voting procedures on election day considered to 'a great' or 'some' extent the needs of the elderly (90%), women (84%), persons with disabilities (80%), women with babies (78%), the partially-sighted (70%) and the blind (66%). The lower levels of agreement reported in the cases of the blind and partially sighted is attributable to a relatively high level of voter uncertainty.

Voter safety and secrecy of the vote

The South African Police Service (SAPS), together with the South African National Defence Force, State Security Agency and other security-related institutions play an indispensible role in ensuring peaceful and free electoral environments at voting stations. The security process is managed through the Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure (JOINTS) which represents all related departments. During election day, the SAPS deploys resources to each voting station to ensure that the voting process is not disputed. Police officers patrol the parameters of the voting station and ensure that party agents do not mobilise or canvas voters within the boundaries of a voting station. Loud-hailing is also restricted directly outside the voting stations. The inside of the voting station is the jurisdiction of the presiding officer and SAPS will only act within the voting station perimeter at the request of the presiding officer. During the 2011 local government elections, 91% of the election observers interviewed stated that security personnel and police were on duty at the time of visiting the voting stations, with two or more security staff being present in most instances. This is an encouraging result that undoubtedly contributes towards the public view that the 2011 local government elections were free and fair.

Ensuring the secrecy of the vote is an integral component of the electoral process and ultimately the credibility of elections, in accordance with the Electoral

Commission's guiding principle that "Your vote is your secret". As such, votes are cast in voting booths where voters are alone to make their mark on ballot papers that are subsequently placed in sealed ballot boxes. With nearly all voters (97%) content with the secrecy of their vote – 76% 'very satisfied' and 21% 'somewhat satisfied' – it seems a fair assertion that a convincing job has been done in respect of this aspect of the electoral process.

Satisfaction with electoral staff

For the 2011 local government elections, the Electoral Commission appointed approximately 215 000 officials (presiding officers, deputy presiding officers and voting officers) from various sectors of society to manage election activities at voting stations and to ensure the efficient operation of voting and counting procedures. Recognising the importance of properly skilled, competent and impartial electoral staff to the overall success of election activities at voting station level as well as nationally, considerable effort is placed by the IEC on recruitment and training procedures. Therefore, voter evaluations of the performance of IEC officials on election day are, to a considerable degree, a reflection of the rigour of the recruitment process, the quality of the training approach and materials as well as the trainers themselves. On aggregate, 97% of voters were 'very' or 'somewhat' satisfied with the quality of service rendered by IEC officials on election day, which is a tremendous compliment to the systems established by the IEC as well as the dedication and commitment of electoral staff.

WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE TO ADVANCE ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION AND LEGITIMACY?

From the preceding sections, it is apparent that the IEC receives positive evaluations on a broad range of aspects relating to the management of the 2011 local government elections, which is reflected in the considerable upswing in the trust vested in the EMB since the late 1990s. At this same time, it is important to consider the mounting international body of empirical evidence on the influence that public confidence in electoral processes exerts on broader attitudes towards democracy, the legitimacy of the democratic system and trust in political institutions (e.g. Rose & Mischler 2009; McAllister & White 2011). This, taken together with the concerted efforts undertaken by the Electoral Commission to improve election management quality over the last decade, raises a fundamental question from a public administration perspective. Specifically, what can be done by the IEC to further promote voter turnout and electoral integrity in the country in coming years? To provide some insight into this matter, we turn to two sets of results from the 2006 and 2010 Voter Participation Surveys (VPS) on intention to vote and reasons for electoral abstention.

In the 2006 and 2010 Voter Participation Surveys, both of which were conducted by the HSRC months prior to local government elections, representative samples of South African adults were asked why they did not vote in previous elections and why they would not vote if an election was held tomorrow. These questions are of

considerable value in helping to understand the range and nature of barriers to voter participation and how they are changing over time. Despite the fact that differential reference is made to national and local government elections, the reasons for not voting in these elections followed similar patterns (Table 3).

The reasons for not voting were grouped in terms of administrative barriers, disillusionment, intimidation and individual barriers. The 2010 VPS revealed that while there is a continued need for the IEC to consolidate its efforts in addressing administrative factors that prevent voting (e.g. registration campaigns and issuing ID books, reducing queuing times, accommodating the needs of the disabled in voting procedures, etc.), the most important reasons for non-electoral participation offered by the voting age population relate to disillusionment, especially in relation to political interest, a lack of belief in personal efficacy (power of the vote), and general dissatisfaction with politics, political institutions and their representatives in the country. Furthermore, there has been a considerable increase in the relative importance of this disillusionment factor since 2006.

Table 3: Reasons for not voting in the last elections and why people would not vote if an election was held tomorrow (percentage)

	2006 Voter Participation Survey		2010 Voter Participation Survey	
	Reasons for not voting in 2004 national and provincial elections	Reasons why would not vote if was a national election tomorrow	Reasons for not voting in 2006 municipal elections	Reasons why would not vote if was a municipal election tomorrow
Administrative barriers (sub-total)	*42*	*21*	*38*	*17*
Not registered	19	14	15	10
Do not possess necessary documents to register	19	6	20	5
Polling station too far away	1	0	1	1
Very long queues	0	0	0	1
Lack of transport	2	0	1	0
Do not know where to vote	1	1	1	0
Disillusionment (sub-total)	*47*	*70*	*50*	*65*
Not interested	35	48	39	37
My vote would not make a difference	3	8	3	11
Disillusioned with politics	5	5	4	8
Not interested in any of existing political parties	2	8	3	7
Too much effort required	1	1	1	1
Only one party could win	1	0	0	0
Intimidation (sub-total)	*2*	*0*	*1*	*2*
Employer would not allow me to vote	1	0	0	2
Fear of intimidation or violence	1	0	1	0
Other individual barriers (sub-total)	*7*	*1*	*4*	*2*
Health reasons or sick	2	0	2	1
I am away from home	6	1	2	1
Total	100	100	100	100

Note: Only people age-eligible to vote (i.e. 18 years and older) were included in the analysis above. Due to rounding off, row percentages may not add up to exactly 100 percent.

This finding was confirmed by a regression undertaken of different variables impacting on voter intention in the Voter Participation Survey report (results not shown). Eight regressions were conducted, looking at the influence of demographic and socio-economic variables on voter intention (Model I); support for the political system satisfaction with democracy and trust in institutions (Model II); Political efficacy and civic duty (Model III); Government responsiveness (Model IV); Political engagement and knowledge (Model V); Political participation (Model VI); Issue salience, as measured by the composite index (0-100 scale) of the importance attached to public policy issues in voting decisions (Model VII). When all of these variables were included in a final regression model (Model VIII), the political efficacy and civic duty measures, interest in municipal elections (political engagement) and previous electoral participation variables were the only items retaining statistical significance when the other political and social-demographic variables were controlled for. None of the respondents' personal characteristics (sex, age, race, education, religious affiliation or disability status) are significant.

Political efficacy and civic duty, measured by "my vote makes a difference", "my vote will ensure I receive quality services", "the party I vote for looks after my interest" and "it is my duty to vote" impacts on whether or not a vote will be cast in an election. Political engagement also matters; with those who are more interested in elections generally following through and expressing intention to vote. Participation in previous elections also influences voter decision, with those having participated in previous elections significantly more likely to vote in forthcoming elections.

In sum it would thus seem that the most critical components relating to decisions to vote are the belief in the power of one's vote in determining electoral and other political decisions, a conviction that the political system is responsive to change through individual or collective action, whether one is interested in politics or not, whether one feels it is one's civic or moral obligation to vote, and whether one has a personal history of casting one's vote in democratic South Africa.

This finding is of immediate relevance for voter education initiatives undertaken by the Electoral Commission and other stakeholders, especially in promoting messages about the power of voting in making a difference, the importance of exercising one's right to vote, as well as strengthening programmes aimed at instilling a culture of voting by getting young South Africans interested in, discussing and following political events. This seems to be the next challenge that faces the IEC.

CONCLUSION

Since the 1994 election, concerns surrounding the election process have fundamentally changed. In the earlier elections, questions centred on whether or not elections would be free from violence and intimidation, adequately organised and whether the rules and regulations surrounding them would be sufficiently observed

and adhered to in order to ensure credible, free and fair results. During and since the first elections, the IEC has proved that it has the ability to successfully manage elections and lately concerns have moved to centre more on trying to increase participation levels, especially among the youth and other vulnerable groups. This type of approach is particularly relevant given the fact that South Africa is a changing democracy with a new political climate and a new generation of "free born" citizens.

Worrying about voter participation levels is not unique to South Africa. Over the past decade there has been rising concern internationally about diminishing electoral participation, declining trust in public institutions, public discontent and hostility (Roberts 2011). This has resulted in a broad set of initiatives and reforms directed at rebuilding the relationship between citizens and the state. These have included measures focused on promoting greater opportunities for the direct engagement of citizens in decision-making processes, as well as the strengthening of state accountability and transparency (Norris 2011).

Recent literature also emphasises that forms of public engagement are undergoing fundamental change rather than decline. Scholars such as Dalton (2006a, 2008a) emphasise that forms of traditional duty-based citizenship engagements (such as voting) have been accompanied by the strengthening of alternative engaged citizenship norms where people rather engage in alternative political activities with a stronger inclination towards civic activities such as volunteering, consumer boycotts and political rallies.

Given that political and civic engagement is evolving, the IEC will have to continuously update its evidence base in order to ensure that decisions are not based on anecdotal accounts or unchallenged assumptions. It should continuously strive to understand what underpins values and views about constitutional democracy in South Africa. Based on this, the IEC has the critical role of ensuring that voters are aware of their civic rights and responsibilities and that they have sufficient knowledge and understanding of electoral processes in order to be able to make informed choices during elections, be that to vote or not to vote.

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