

PARTY NOMINEE OR INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE?

Examining Electoral Reforms and the Use of Digital Technologies for Voter Participation in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses electoral reforms and the use of digital technologies for voter participation in South Africa. The study employed focus group discussions and in-depth interviews through semi-structured questions to engage with voters and politicians. Informed by theories on politics and technology, the article notes that the current electoral system has advantages and disadvantages, though it can be enhanced by the inclusion of a mixed proportional or constituency-based electoral system whereby voters elect political party candidates or independent candidates to represent their constituencies. The article argues that digital technologies alone cannot enhance voter participation without electoral policies that promote voter participation in the candidate selection processes for provincial and national elections. The article further highlights the fact that the use of digital technologies and a mixed electoral system are desirable for maximum citizen participation in national and provincial elections. However, some political parties enjoying dominance in the multi-party democracy might perceive reform as unfavourable. The article concludes that consensus and political will are fundamental to harness all progressive electoral reforms and digital tools for sustainable democracy.

Keywords: proportional representation (PR), mixed electoral system, voter participation, independent candidates, multi-party democracy, digital technologies

INTRODUCTION

This article joins the ongoing debate on electoral policy reforms and voter participation in South Africa. In 2020, the New Nation Movement (NNM)

challenged the Constitutional Court of South Africa to review Electoral Act 73 of 1998 which allows only political parties, not independent candidates, to contest for elections. The current Electoral Act permits political parties to contest for elections at provincial and national level and states that a person ceases to be a member of the National Assembly if he or she loses party membership. In response to the court challenge by the NNM, in June 2020 the Constitutional Court declared the Electoral Act unconstitutional and passed judgement that Parliament should amend the Act to allow independent candidates run for provincial and national elections. The Constitutional Court, therefore, gave Parliament a two-year period to amend the Electoral Act and grant individuals the right to contest as independent candidates. William Gumede (2020b) asserts that the decision by the Constitutional Court paves the way for larger policy changes, directly or indirectly, to the country's electoral system. This may bring back the accountability currently lacking in South Africa's elective system.

Party identification had been viewed as stabilising voting patterns for the individual and the party system (Dalton 2014, p. 194); but scholars argue that the 2019 general elections reflected a loss of citizen trust in political institutions (Gumede 2020b; Schulz-Herzenberg 2019). Schulz-Herzenberg (2019, p. 462) argues that there has been a decline of partisanship in South Africa in the years prior to the 2019 general elections, reflecting that party 'identification had begun to respond to more immediate environmental factors'. Thus, there has been a rise of citizen displeasure with unresponsive and unaccountable democratic institutions and even the electoral system itself. This study follows up on the current debate by shining a light on the electoral reforms and use of technology to enhance voter participation, accountability and responsibility of democratic institutions in South Africa. The study analyses the electoral reforms and digital technologies suggested by political analysts and other politicians, and whether they can improve democracy in South Africa.

SOUTH AFRICA'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Since 1994, scholars have been debating the stability of multi-party competition in South Africa, noting the imbalanced partisan competition, racial cleavages and dominance of the ruling party African National Congress (ANC) (Southall 1998; Friedman 1999; Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi 2005). In 1993, the interim constitution proposed a system of proportional representation (PR) whereby a political party (not candidates) gains a number of seats in proportion to the number of votes it receives. By proposing PR, the interim constitution of 1993 aimed at multiparty politics with many political parties participating in the election system (Friedman 1999). The 1993 proportional representation of the interim constitution was meant

to promote a governmental of national unity at both provincial and national level for a period of five years, whereby any party with five seats would be considered in the power-sharing bloc, those securing 5% of national vote would get a cabinet position and a party with 20% of the national vote would participate in nominating the country's deputy president (Gumede 2020b).

The interim constitution of 1993 was abandoned in 1996, prior to the 1999 elections which used the national list system of proportional representation, omitting the power-sharing agreement of the 1993 Constitution. The national list system of proportional representation has no fixed proportion of the total number of votes or threshold required for parties to gain representation in national or provincial legislatures (EISA 2019). Thus, the population figures for each of South Africa's nine provinces determine the number of representatives per multi-member constituency. Regional or provincial representatives elected proportionally from each province occupy 50% (200) of the seats in the National Assembly (Gumede 2020b). The other 50% (200) of the provincial representatives (national list seats) are for overall proportionality.

In 1996, democratic South Africa adopted Section 4(1) of the Act (No. 108 of 1996) which states that the National Assembly should have not less than 350 members or more than 400 members population size of each province. The 1996 Constitution states that it is the responsibility of Parliament to amend the Electoral Act. Gumede (2020b) argues that though proportional representation is emphasised, the current constitution is unclear about the kind of proportionality because both national and provincial elections have a closed party-list electoral system. This is the current argument about South Africa's electoral system, that parties choose candidates without voters' input. Voters simply vote into power the party which consequently chooses candidates to occupy the seats. This is viewed as closed party-list system because candidates are drawn from the party's compiled list. Gumede (2005) argues that 'parties often foist their selected candidates on to constituencies where the residents do not know them, and they do not know the residents'. Often candidates are selected based on their loyalty to the party and leader, rather than on competence or talent and this undermines effective democracy by overlooking factors such as competitiveness, equality, responsiveness, and accountability (Lipset 1983; Horowitz 1985; Dahl 1989).

At local government level, however, South Africa uses a mixed electoral system whereby half the councillors are elected at ward level through local or constituency representation, while the other half comes from the closed-party list proportional representation (PR) system. The party still controls who should be on the list of candidates, for example in 2016 ANC released the names of their mayoral candidates after the elections, and the electorate had no idea who they were electing as city mayors (Gumede 2020b).

The advantage of the PR system is that it is considered an effective and productive reduction of parties with large majorities, enabling the inclusivity of all political parties regardless of their numbers (Pukelsheim 2014). This inclusion of many political parties does promote political diversity and representation, as every vote counts. The PR system has been viewed as fairer because it also uses the largest-remainder method whereby surplus seats are apportioned according to the number of votes. From 1993, during the transitional period of anti-apartheid movements to the non-racial, democratic elections on 27 April 1994 (Booyesen & Masterson 2009), the PR system was instrumental in discouraging political conflict or violence. Voters are therefore familiar with a PR system enabling even minority parties to secure seats (EISA 2019). Voters' political choice is guaranteed through a diversity of political parties reflecting a demographic and ethnicity diversity. In a nutshell the PR system is viewed as easier to run where all votes count and are equal (Pukelsheim, 2014).

The disadvantage of the current South African electoral system is that it has not been able to bring about accountability regardless of its proportional representation of political parties. As a result, there have been 'higher abstentions, individual level vote shifts, vote splitting, and later-than-usual vote decisions' as evidence of a decline in partisan loyalties (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019, p. 463). Schulz-Herzenberg (ibid.) goes on to say that 'the overall effect of weakening partisanship increased the fluidity of voting behaviour, and in turn, increased the unpredictability of the 2019 electoral outcomes'. The other drawback of the current electoral system is that the closed party list system has been viewed as alienating voter participation. Since the party selects its own candidates, this is therefore at the party's discretion rather than that of the voter. Gumede (2020b) views the closed party list as undermining participatory democracy. The participation of voters as citizens is limited only to party selection and does not include candidate selection. Voters are also not involved in selecting the internal candidates or the closed party list, hence are also limited in selecting a presidential candidate. They only vote for a presidential candidate enlisted by political parties, and parties are responsible for the candidate selection, and can even enlist corrupt candidates (Gumede 2020b).

In other words, the party leaders are responsible for electing Members of Parliament (MPs), hence promoting party allegiance with less public accountability. South Africa has witnessed voter dissatisfaction after elections, evidenced by street protests and violence. Thus the 'the erosion of party ties has obvious and predictable effects on electoral behaviour' (Dalton 2014, p. 197). Large number of voters, including young people, have taken to protesting on social media and some have stayed away from political participation, resulting in an increasingly low voter turnout (EISA 2019). Also, there has been a rise in extra

parliamentary political activities based on racial conflicts and class struggles (Gumede 2015). This study therefore puts into perspective the requisite electoral reforms and other technological preferences needed to boost political participation and voter confidence in the electoral system.

Proposed Electoral Reforms and Digital Technologies for Voter Participation

Electoral reforms or the application of digital technologies should bring about solutions where challenges have been experienced in previous elections. Challenges in South Africa's previous elections range from the facilitation of the election process at polling stations, the quality of the electoral infrastructure, training or education of election officials, logistics of delivering ballot boxes or other election material, and the challenges of the current electoral system itself (EISA 2019).

Firstly, the electoral system, which is subject to more parliamentary deliberation and the amendment of the Electoral Act, is found to exclude citizens from participating in national and provincial elections. Thus, political analysts advocate for voter involvement in decision-making such as the direct nomination of candidates rather than a closed party list. Gumede (2020b) mentions that the recall of incompetent party representatives must be made by not only by the parties but also by the voters who elected the representative; and there must be the means for voters to determine their own development and participation in politics beyond formal national and provincial elections. The amendment of the electoral system must also allow voters to elect independent or non-partisan candidates to cabinet, and facilitate an internal democracy inclusive of all races and demographics, with religious and ethnic diversity (Gumede 2020b). Gumede (2020b) calls for an innovative electoral process whereby voters will participate with ease and could even express themselves if unhappy with all the political parties contesting. He opines that the ballot box must have an extra ticking box where voters would be able to indicate if they were unhappy with all the parties contesting and thus cannot vote, rather than have a silent, low voter turnout.

Secondly, it involves the election process, the voting and counting of votes. The national population has expanded due to the increase of youthful voters, and they form a significant proportion of the electorate that implicates South Africa's aggregate turnout rates (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019; Seekings 2014). EISA's election observer mission in 2014 also highlighted a 95% increase of registered voters, and they therefore recommended that the IEC should consider increasing the number of polling stations to meet the increasing number of registered voters per each election cycle (EISA 2014). In the 2014 elections, the Constitutional Court ended up passing the judgement that IEC voter addresses must be recorded on

the voters' roll to avoid bussing voters from one municipality to another. Reports from election observer teams highlighted several challenges, such as the bussing of voters into other municipalities, the late provision by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of the voters' roll, and election-related violence (EISA 2014). For instance, the EISA observer mission in the 2014 elections witnessed the late delivery of voting material experienced at some polling stations, and election violence in parts of KwaZulu-Natal (EISA 2019).

In 2019, the EISA report showed that some polling substations used for national and provincial elections had long, slow-moving queues and the zip-zip machines malfunctioned, resulting in election officials opting for the manual, hard copy of the voters' roll. The counting of special votes was also problematic where election material was found not sealed nor arranged properly, for example in Dihlabeng Maluti Hoogland School, thus party agents became involved by reminding officials to count the votes. The other challenge observed by the EISA EOM was that vote counting was lengthy, with allegations of multiple voting where the indelible ink was easily removed by voters. To mitigate alleged double voting, the EISA report (2019, p.11) recommended 'a harmonised digital voter register to ensure that the zip-zip machines can be used to track persons who have already cast their ballot and serve the purpose of a double check alongside the hard copy registers'. The report also suggested proper planning of sub-stations to manage the number of voters as well as vote counting.

This study therefore considers the perspectives of political analysts, as demonstrated by the literature, in relation to the views of voters and politicians on electoral reforms and the use of digital technologies for voter participation.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Political Participation and Digital Technologies

Theorising democratic participation using electoral policies or digital technologies has been difficult, especially in Africa where there are specific political contexts. Some studies show that digital technologies can enhance democracy through fair media coverage for all political parties, equal access to digital tools (such as social networking sites) and reliable tools for voting and tabulating votes, on the premise that the contextual socio-political factors are conducive for the success of such technologies (Mathe 2020a; Chiumbu 2015; Mathe 2021). The technological determinism paradigm acknowledges a relationship between politics and technology or innovation, stating that technological innovations can promote democracy (Ellul 1990), although the 'properties of certain kinds of technologies are intrinsically linked to particular institutionalised patterns of power and

authority' (Winner 1986). Thus, those with access to the democratic spaces of technology are in a better position to determine their political participation and the outcome of democratic processes. Several scholars have written on the diverse ways in which the social media, web 2.0 technologies, electronic voting and similar have intensified political participation (Mathe 2020b; Mathe 2021). The internet, in the form of social media and other democratic spaces, has enhanced the interaction of political players and voters whereby voters' decision-making is influenced (Mathe 2020b).

Through social media citizens enjoy freedom of assembly and participation as they debate issues of national interest (Mathe & Caldwell 2017). Government departments in South Africa have also progressed in terms of public communication through social media pages where they update and engage with the citizenry. Information technologies (IT) as democratic tools can dislodge political and social barriers through citizen online connection and civic engagement, generating an informed citizenry (Kedzie 1997). Mathe (2020b) argues that technologies, if utilised appropriately, can facilitate democratic progress; and Chiumbu (2015, pp. 9–10) notes that media technologies enhance political participation. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, digital technologies in Africa have been able to democratise some political spheres. Dhawraj (2013) notes that South Africa made use of social media in 2009 and 2014 and this in turn influenced the national elections result. Social movement activists utilised social media spaces for mobilisation and protest.

Citizen mobilisation and protest have been happening through online spaces; however, Mutsvairo and Karam (2018) argue that social media has not been effective in countries ruled by despotic governments. Some governments 'do not tolerate any dissension within the public sphere, whether it is in the cybersphere, the media sphere or the physical realm, in terms of protesting' (Mutsvairo & Karam 2018, p. 9). Mathe (2021) has also shown that some governments avoid implementing electoral policies which threaten their dominance.

On the other hand, some governments have passed electoral laws that make it difficult to enhance democracy. Scholars have argued that technology cannot be used as panacea but as a tool for democratic progress (Mathe 2020b). Proponents of the social construction of technology base this on the perspective that technology cannot override electoral problems on the ground or undo societal problems without appropriate policies or human effort for change. Scholars like Robert Dahl (1989, p. 339) have written that technology is malleable and can be utilised for bad or good; while Castells (2004) argues that technology alone cannot guarantee a change of democratic processes or political institutions. Without a supportive mechanism for democratic change or positive human factors, technologies can erode social capital (Putnam 2000; Joerges 1999). Thus, social actions can

determine the importance of technology (Hoff 2000) because it is 'susceptible to modification by its social practice, thereby leading to a whole range of potential social outcomes' (Castells 2001, p. 5). For instance, in Zimbabwe the internet has been littered with fake news or propaganda and the state has had considerable control of the media (Mathe 2020a).

The study therefore examines the utilisation of digital technologies for voter participation in relation to electoral reforms as a social practice needed for democratic transition.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research method through a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix) to engage with several voters and politicians in South Africa. The collection of data was carried out between 1 February 2021 and 30 July 2021. Three focus group discussions were carried out telephonically through *WhatsApp* groups due to coronavirus pandemic lockdowns. Purposively, the researcher made use of convenient key participants who could easily introduce additional people to participate in a *WhatsApp group* discussion. The three groups formed had participant numbers ranging from 12 to 14 for each group (with more males than females), mostly from the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. The age of participants ranged from 27 to 40 years, with the largest number from the urban areas of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal while a few were from the peri-urban areas of the Eastern Cape. Although voters were not from all provinces, information collected does reflect voters' perspectives as citizens of South Africa from urban or poor peri-urban areas. Their perspectives cannot be generalised.

Politicians from several political parties, namely the ANC, the United Democratic Movement (UDM), One South Africa Movement, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), participated in this study. While some participants would not disclose their party affiliations, the study focus was aimed at perspectives on the electoral reforms and the use of digital technologies for voter participation, rather than establishing party affiliations. Since a balanced perspective was needed, participants from major political parties were essential for the validity and reliability of the research findings. In-depth interviews with participants were carried out telephonically, while some preferred answering through emails. Altogether 19 politicians participated in this study.

The perspectives in the study reflect concerns from voters, political parties and politicians in South Africa. Since some would not allow their identity to be disclosed, the study generally concealed identities and only displayed the identities of few politicians, with their consent. Some voters responded in their local languages which had to be translated into English. Data transcribed was coded into thematic categories for analysis through the Nvivo 11 research tool.

This article does not reflect all perspectives collected from the participants but focuses on comments that answer the objectives of the study.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study reflect voter and politicians' perspectives. Themes extracted were voter apathy, candidate nomination and the recall of public representatives, party system, affiliation and independent candidates, digital voter registration and voting, voter education, Election Management Body (IEC) and the challenges involved in ensuring voter turnout.

Voter Apathy

Many voters listed apathy as the primary cause for low voter turnout during elections. Several voters noted that politics has not offered any solutions, especially for black livelihoods, hence some voters distance themselves from voting activities. Schulz-Herzenberg (2019, p. 463) also suggests that a lack of accountability has caused 'higher abstentions, individual level vote shifts, vote splitting, and later-than-usual vote decisions'. A participant noted that with the rise of corruption and unemployment many voters, especially the youth, have lost faith in the government and in the ruling party. The EISA report (2019) indicates that a large number of voters, including the youth, have taken to protesting on social media, while some abstain from voting, resulting in a low voter turnout. Another participant added that 'the reason for the low numbers of voters is because people no longer have an interest and loyalty in our political parties as they are no longer serving the interest of the citizens but are just power hungry'.

Some voters believed that although technology can be included to facilitate the electoral processes, it cannot undo the lack of interest or voter apathy. Thus, the political problem is the lack of accountability and responsibility that need to be dealt with until the public regains trust in political institutions. Social constructivists have argued in the same vein, that technology cannot override electoral or political problems. In this regard, some participants noted that there must be an amendment of the current electoral system to promote political accountability and responsibility. Comments from voters include the following:

I think the parties, or the ruling party, is not fulfilling their promises as we can see lot of corruption happening.

We have an ethical political leadership crisis in this country. We need a new paradigm, the system is so corrupted to the extent that it needs a complete overhaul.

I do not believe that the voter turnout reduced because of Ramaphosa, people just lost faith in politics and if that was the case, they would have opted for other candidates in various political parties that we have.

When asked what difference an extra space on the ballot paper would make for voters to turn out and register their protest, one voter suggested that a pre-election survey would give a fair and unbiased understanding of what causes people not to participate in voting. Some politicians feared that adding an extra tick space on the ballot for a protest vote could be manipulated by political elements, noting that it would need extra voter education effort to ensure that there were no spoilt papers or vote swapping.

Candidate Nomination and Recall of Public Representatives

Voters suggested that candidate nomination should not be limited to party members only. A voter noted that it is quite easy to identify errors, but the solution is to enfranchise voters so that they participate in candidate selection. One voter complained that a councillor who was imposed by the party on their ward does not even reside in that ward. Scholars debate the fact that candidates are often selected on the basis of their loyalty to the party rather than their competence, thereby undermining the democratic qualities of equality, competition, responsiveness and accountability. An EFF affiliate confirmed that they as party members select a candidate at local level, who then proves his or her competence in the party up to national level. Some of the comments from the participants are:

I think it is good that voters must vote for the candidates and there must a basic criterion, like post matric qualification, for being a candidate, some of the leaders do not want to quit and they kill for power.

I believe voting for political parties by people should be given the same right when it comes to choosing the candidates inside the political parties, as we all know once a political party wins elections, it is up to the internal people of the party to choose who takes over without the involvement of the public, just like how we vote for the political parties, the general public should also vote on who becomes president as well as ministers.

The comment above proves Gumede's (2020b) contention that the cabinet should also reflect a non-partisan inclusivity of various political demographics.

An ANC affiliate highlighted the fact that the ruling party has passed new guidelines at municipal level allowing communities to elect their own candidate. When probed about the fact that a mixed electoral system has existed at local level, the participant argued that ‘the process of involvement of voters to select a party candidate was not popular up until now, meaning it is a first-hand experience for most of the voters to participate in choosing their own candidates’. Another participant argued that since voters and general party members are still excluded from selecting candidates at national and provincial level, they can therefore ‘use persuasion in the public discourse through various platforms to try and indicate which candidates they would want on those lists. Sometimes it might not really be an issue of the public indicating candidate preferences but the type of a leader(s) that must emerge from those party lists’. Also, ‘unanimous condemnation of corruption, bribes or use of money to influence members of political parties when electing leaders might help shape discourses within the various political party ranks in as far as condemnation of corruption and other unwanted practices are concerned’.

Voters also noted that the party list is indeed a problem, making it difficult for the citizens to hold elected people accountable. An ANC-affiliated politician argued that political party members must be encouraged to participate through a fair process which promotes transparency and accountability. The president of the UDM, Bantu Holomisa, contended that:

Intraparty democracy is not open to the public unless they are members of a particular political party. Fortunately, the Constitution declares it a right for each South African older than 18 to belong to a political party if they so choose. Therefore, if voters wish to be part of selecting candidates and prioritising parties’ candidates lists, it is their right to become members of the political parties of their choice and participate in those parties’ candidate selection and list processes.

Maimane of the One South Africa movement noted that if political parties do not want to involve the public in candidate selection, they should at least be transparent about letting the public know who their constituency representatives are. He further said that a closed party list is undemocratic because the voters and party members do not know who they are voting for. Not all party members, who select party candidates, should be given the right to elect party candidates even at provincial and national level. It is noteworthy that there is therefore a need to amend the Electoral Act for the purpose of transparency and voter participation.

Regarding the recall of incompetent or corrupt public representatives, one participant highlighted that parties should consider reducing the two-thirds

majority required to recall an incompetent public representative to a one-third majority; while another hinted that the recall of public representatives by voters after elections can be abused if the threshold is low: 'it must be high and be for highly incompetent and corrupt people'. Others believed that voters or communities must be empowered to recall incompetent public representatives.

The Party System, Affiliation and Independent Candidates

Voters noted that the multi-party system has been in place since 1993 and its amendment by Parliament will also require voter education, as EISA (2019) has shown that voters are familiar with proportional representation. A participant pointed out that voting is heavily influenced by political affiliation in the sense that voters do not focus on electing a suitable candidate to represent their communities; hence the elected candidates who fail to represent people's needs. One voter noted that the problem of the electoral system can be traced back to the historical background whereby the multi-system was made not for voters but for parties and politicians. Booysen and Masterson (2009) add to this argument that the PR system was primarily designed to discourage political conflict during the transitional period, hence some voters feel the system had no intention of ensuring complete voter participation but supported a coalition of political parties. A participant went on to say that 'voting is a right that ought to be protected and preserved at all times regardless of the method, our hard-earned democracy never guaranteed a smooth operation of all facets of governance'.

Moreover, some voters believed that political parties will still be dominant even with the inclusion of independent candidates at national and provincial level. Given the dominant party system, voters noted that changes should begin within political parties because candidates or public representatives have to abide by party policy. A participant opined that parties finance their campaigns and offer support, making it difficult for independent candidates without party support as they do not benefit from being in a party where every vote counts through the proportional representation (PR) system (Pukelsheim 2014). Another voter added that 'supporting political parties is like supporting football clubs, no matter how imperfect the club is, one will keep on supporting it'. One noted: 'Remember political parties want numbers, that is the most important thing, numbers. If they came with mechanisms to make civilians have a say in the nomination of their candidates, it would be a contradiction of some sort, bear in mind that parties want to convince ordinary voters to buy, believe and trust their manifestos.'

Gumede (2020b) has argued that this drawback of the party system alienates voters. Some political parties, the ANC in particular, have recently passed new guidelines at municipal level by empowering communities to select candidates.

However, this may not sound new because a mixed electoral system has always been used at local government level whereby half the councillors are elected by ward and half imposed by party from a closed list (Gumede 2020b). Voters hinted that independent candidates at local government level have been overshadowed by political parties and there has been lack of information to support them. Some voters agreed that supporting independent candidates at local to national level will challenge party dominance.

Mmusi Maimane also added that there has been a lack of mechanisms to support independent candidates even at local government level, and that an information gap has been a problem. The Electoral Act does allow independent candidates to participate at local government level but there is not much information regarding the success of independent candidates' campaigns because of traditional party dominance. Maimane noted that there should be an association to support, train and fund independent candidates elected by communities. He argued that communities must be allowed to elect a candidate of their choice. One voter confirmed that indeed, knowing a candidate may boost voter turnout because voters will put their trust in independent candidates they know, unless or until they too betray the voters. The voter commented that 'political parties impose corrupt leaders with next to zero academic credentials of proven track record'. Maimane further argued that if an independent candidate is found to be corrupt, communities would recall her or him, unlike in a political party because some parties are captured (in the sense of being corrupt). Holomisa added that choosing a specific person as a candidate is not yet accommodated at national and provincial elections where proportional representation is used. However, the UDM has held the view that South Africa should consider a mixed system at these levels, even to the point where the people may elect their own president, instead of that person being foisted on them by the ruling party.

Voter Education

Participants highlighted the fact that voter education is essential if there is a need to boost voter participation and weaken political party dominance. Voters argued that most voters in the rural areas do not know that they have the power to change national office bearers. They opined that the ruling party, the ANC, would not promote voter education because illiterate voters benefit them as a traditional party. Adrian Roos of the DA also mentioned that the electoral task team of January 2003 did consider the merits of an open-list system over a closed-list system, but the majority chose to recommend a closed-list system due to practical constraints, particularly the literacy rate in South Africa. Another interviewee had the opinion that politicians take advantage of the fact that

voters do not know about the processes of electing representative candidates at community or local level.

One participant noted that the IEC and other interested groups should utilise user-friendly applications such as *WhatsApp* that require less data bundles to ensure that everyone, regardless of social class and geographical location, is able to participate. It was further noted that social media networking sites, or any other messaging compatible with all mobile phones (not only smartphones), can be used to educate voters. It was also noted that the ultimate objective should be to ensure that citizens' right to vote is not infringed by the digital system. This means that in-depth campaigns and various educational advocacies should be widely conducted to ensure that all citizens are familiar with the electoral systems. Participants pointed that 'It is no longer a question of "if" electoral reform will happen, but "when" it will happen because the Constitutional Court declared it unconstitutional, therefore, readiness and preparedness is key'.

Digital Voter Registration and Voting

When asked if low voter turnout can be resolved by implementing electronic voting, some voters believed that voter apathy has far-reaching socio-economic and political challenges that will not be amended only by digital voter registration and voting. It was noted that an efficient political system, enhanced by all possible means of voting, can enhance democracy, because political leadership in South Africa lacks accountability and transparency. As demonstrated in the literature, scholars argue that technology alone cannot solve societal problems. There is therefore a need for electoral reform accompanied by digital technologies for easy voter participation. However, some voters noted that South Africa is still largely rural and thus faces challenges with internet access. A participant commented that besides challenges with internet access in rural areas, electronic voting may yield better voter involvement if introduced correctly in a manner in which voters take ownership and entitlement of their voting rights, compared to the on-site ballot poll.

Some of the voters added that online voting can be a huge change for voters, but still insisted that not everyone is sufficiently literate or has access to ICTs, which means that voter training and funding for training will be needed. Another view was that politicians are able to manipulate everything in their power; hence if elections are to be electronic, they will need a security system to avoid hacking. Mathe (2020b) also reflected on this challenge in the context of Zimbabwe; the country is largely rural, and few have internet access, though he noted that some governments may not want to implement electoral policies that threaten their dominance. It was noteworthy that the online-based voting system might outdo

the challenge of long queues. Another voter argued that electronic voting should be open to those with access to ICTs, while those without ICT access should vote manually. Further comments are as follows:

[The] majority of people do most of their things on smartphones or computers, if we had a system that is online, for example, uses your identity with facial recognition and then after[wards] gives you a list of parties to vote for, I believe we would have a higher turnaround of voters if we had an online voting system.

Government should subsidise data and allow access like in social media. Design a special application that could be downloaded by voters but have strong security features against fraud.

Most participants viewed electronic voting as progressive and likely to increase voter turn-out, especially at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is prevalent; while others focussed more on the challenges of implementation.

It was noted that the IEC has already implemented an online voter registration for the 2021 local government elections, stating that the interface is user-friendly although there is a problem with ID submission. Participants highlighted the fact that the system has a good verification system which requires the user's cell number and OTP. Hence the argument was that those able to use online registration or voting should be allowed to do so, while those without could remain manual. In 2019, the EISA (2019) report suggested a harmonised digital voter register to assist zip-zip machines track those persons who have already voted, in order to curb alleged double voting. A participant highlighted that there has been a manipulation of election results through the existing technology over the years, such as the uploading of results through result-slips from municipal offices to an online results system. They say the system is ostensibly audited and reflected countless errors slipping through in critical areas over the years. The argument was that voting systems, whether they are manual or electronic, remain vulnerable to humans wanting to manipulate the outcome in favour of a certain party. Thus, some participants objected that technology is not necessarily the answer in a country like South Africa with high levels of corruption, noting that 'it is therefore doubtful whether technology can be, or should be, fully used to run all aspects of voting and/or tabulation'. It was noted that several developed countries stopped using e-voting, mostly citing those risks that outweigh the advantages. For instance, the Netherlands adopted electronic voting in the mid-2000s but returned to manual voting because the security and management of the equipment were not properly regulated.

*Election Management Body and the Challenges Involved in Ensuring
Voter Turnout*

Most voters agreed that the IEC officials need proper planning and adequate training to manage the elections and ensure that voters are not frustrated with registration and voting. One participant commented that 'IEC must improve its service delivery; I had recently accompanied a family member to our local office and the workers there had a technical problem which persisted a couple of visits'. It was highlighted that local offices must be provided with enough technical support in time and should bring polling stations closer to the people. When probed about whether the increase of polling stations was due to the increase of voters, some participants argued that the increase of polling stations was not caused by high voter turnout but simply by the demarcations of wards and constituencies which resulted in the increase of polling stations. Another politician opined that the demarcation of voting districts was a strategy to break up areas supporting opposition parties, what he termed gerrymandering, in favour of the ruling party. The consensus of opinion is that the increase of polling stations is indeed an innovation helping to reduce the long queues that often resulted in voter impatience or lack of interest in voting. It was highlighted that the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has over the years adjusted and increased the number of voting districts (VDs) because of population growth and population movement. One participant argued that 'polling stations may be increased but that does not guarantee that voters will turn up'.

Participants noted that the IEC is affected by inefficient processes due to unpreparedness; for instance, some said the late delivery of election material had been a perennial problem. One politician noted that 'the IEC needs to tighten up the role of its staff in manipulating election process which can create certain level of anxiety for voters and instability across the country'. Another voter opined that 'there must be proper planning by both Parliament and the IEC in making sure that everything is in order in time, for instance Parliament to give the IEC enough time before pronouncing the election date and Parliament to allocate budget for IEC to procure all the needed equipment and IEC distribution of election material on time'.

Participants concluded that these electoral reforms are needed but should be accompanied by easy digital tools for voter participation, although there are fears of human manipulation. Some participants argued that both proportional and constituency-based electoral systems are needed. Constituencies should be introduced to the proportional representation system to ensure that politicians have specific, geographically defined communities to represent and to whom they are held accountable. They added that voters must have the right to elect the

president of the country directly, as is the case in many established democracies across the globe, instead of the (approximately) 3 000 delegates at a party congress choosing a party president to be foisted onto an entire nation. Another participant commented that 'It is necessary to have a structured debate around these issues and it is imperative that we, as political parties, must formally engage as primary stakeholders of the IEC and South Africa's democratic processes'.

DISCUSSION

This article is based on the findings of the study, as shown by previous studies, that electoral reforms should be implemented to curb or deal with societal problems on grounds such as corruption, lack of accountability and transparency. The findings of the study show that low voter turnout is because of voter apathy due to the incompetence of public representatives. Political analysts take the view that voters should participate in party nominee selection suggestions rather than having parties impose candidates through a closed party list. The current party system is seen as inadequate for dealing with the corruption and lack of response by public officials; hence a need to reform or include voters in the selection processes to elect candidates of their choice rather than imposing candidates through a closed party-list. Constituency candidates should come not only from the closed party-list but also the communities in which candidates purport to lead. This article therefore joins the debate that South Africans should adopt a mixed electoral system not only at local government level but also at national and provincial level with a constituency-based voting.

Voters should be able to elect an independent president or the member of parliament of their choice without being entirely dependent on the party system to foist a candidate on them. Several electoral systems across the globe do allow voters or party members to elect a party candidate or independent candidate of their choice, though that does not guarantee either competence and accountability. There are still public protests in the aftermath of the election because there is no clear framework for voters to recall corrupt or incompetent public representatives. Maimane's progressive idea is that the association of independent candidates should formulate policies in which communities will be able to elect as well as recall public representatives. This article argues that political parties should not only involve voters to elect party candidates at local government level, but also consider voter participation to recall incompetent public representatives. Gumede (2020b) also maintains that there must be a framework whereby voters participate in recalling incompetent public representatives, but this can only be possible if voters know the candidates being voted for in their constituencies.

A striking feature of the evidence collected is that voters favoured reform (candidate selection by voters and even the inclusion of independent candidates) more than the politicians. Mathe (2021) argues that governments and politicians are likely to oppose the implementation of electoral reforms that threaten their existence or dominance. This article further argues that consensus is key, and every innovative idea meant to improve democracy should be accepted for its sustainability, responsibility, and accountability. Mathe (2020b) argues that technological innovations and electoral reforms utilised for the good enhance democracy. Thus, a mixed electoral system is progressive if it allows voters to select party candidates at constituency level.

A mixed electoral system such as the inclusion of independent candidates at provincial and national level will enhance democracy and possibly defuse party dominance.

The implementation of electronic voting or other technologies to enhance voter participation will not be fully effective if South Africa does not deal with the political challenges emanating from the current electoral system. The findings of the study have shown that low voter turnout is a consequence more of poor governance than of the challenges of voting or voter registration. Thus, technological electoral tools can only be supplementary where there is conducive ground for voter participation. Mathe (2020a) argues that technology cannot be used as a panacea for socio-political problems. Social constructionists also note that technology cannot override electoral problems or undo societal problems without policies or human effort for change (Dahl 1989, p. 339; Castells 2004). Thus, digital voting is secondary, and the primary objective is the establishment of voter participation in all democratic processes. Hence electoral amendment is fundamental, coupled with complementary and inexpensive (or affordable) technology for voter participation and education. Meaningful electoral reforms should be promoted for sustainable democracy. However, the problem is that some stakeholders will try to avoid reforms or technologies that threaten their dominance. Political goodwill is essential for sustainable democracy.

CONCLUSION

The article discussed the challenges faced in the current electoral system in South Africa. It also introduced a perspective on the electoral reforms and technological means that the country could implement to ensure that voters participate in candidate selection processes for a sustainable democracy. The current political problem in South Africa is that corruption, incompetence, and a lack of responsibility have become common in party institutions, leading to lower voter turnout. This article therefore emphasises that voter involvement should be utilised to enhance democracy with an easy facilitation of digital tools.

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Appendix A

Electoral Reforms and Digital Tools in South Africa (Semi-Structured Questionnaire)

1. What are the challenges faced so far with the current electoral system in South Africa and how can technology be integrated to transform it? Probe: How can we incorporate technological means to reform the electoral system?
2. How do you suggest voters participate internally towards a closed party list of candidates? Voters want to have a say in choosing candidates?
3. In what way do you think e-voting will assist changes in South Africa's electoral system?
4. Can voter turnout increase through e-voting and what are the complications?
5. There is a report that recommended the increase of polling stations to curb long queues. what is your perspective concerning this?
6. The last election there was complaints of late delivery of voting material by IEC. How can we avoid such a logistic problem in the future?
7. Concerning the inclusion of independent candidates into the electoral system, do you think the electoral system would be workable to accommodate such changes?
8. Any channels of voter participation after elections, e.g. recalling of incompetent candidates?
9. What is your take on the perspective that the ballot box must have an extra tick space for voters to express their unhappiness with parties contesting?
10. Any changes or recommendation you would like the IEC to work on?