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Final voter registration weekend, Kayamandi

The South African non-voter: An analysis

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3) Introduction

On 8 May 2019, South Africans voted in their sixth democratic national and provincial elections. A record 26,7 million eligible South Africans registered to vote in the election.¹ The registered population represented 74.6% of the total voting age population of over 35,8 million.[†] Over 17.6 million voters participated on election day. Yet electoral participation decreased quite dramatically, accelerating the steady decline in voter turnout across South Africa's previous democratic elections.

The decline in the turnout rate of 8% among registered voters from 73% in 2014 to 66% in the 2019 elections was the sharpest since the 2004 elections. It meant that, for the first time since the founding democratic elections in 1994, less than half (49%) of all eligible South Africans cast a vote in 2019. South Africa's participation levels are now on par with other low turnout countries in terms of its eligible participation.

Voter turnout is regarded as a crucial indicator of the vitality and health of a democracy. High turnout is a sign of an enthusiastic and politically involved electorate while low turnout is associated with voter apathy and even mistrust of the political process. The steady decline in voter participation raises important questions about the quality of civic engagement and citizen involvement in South Africa's democratic politics as well as levels of voter apathy and mistrust in the political system. With fewer than half of all eligible voters participating in the 2019 elections the sanctioning and representative functions of South African elections are now under scrutiny.

To date, there is little research which explores the reasons for the decline in voter participation, and more specifically, the motivations for choosing not to vote. This research paper addresses this knowledge gap on South Africa's non-voters.

4) Research objectives

The paper's primary research objective is to identify the demographic profiles and attitudinal characteristics of South African non-voters in the most recent 2019 elections. Its main purpose is to use the results to assist South African electoral actors including the media, political parties and the Electoral Commission to identify and mobilize potential voters across the populace in the forthcoming 2021 municipal elections and beyond. Ultimately, the overarching aim is to find ways to encourage citizens back to the polls to enhance participatory democracy and civic-mindedness, deepen a culture of multipartism, and enhance the quality of the mandate bestowed on South Africa's elected governments.

5) Methodology

The analysis for the research paper draws on a number of sources. The election results were taken directly from official figures provided by Electoral Commission (IEC). The voting age population (VAP) estimated figures were obtained from official census statistics supplied by Statistics South Africa. Additional election material was sourced from the recently published book volume Schulz-Herzenberg, C., and Southall, R. eds. 2019. *Election 2019: Change and Stability in South Africa's Democracy*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media/ Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

[†] number based on the estimated voting age population data provided by Statistics South Africa

The quantitative data analysis is based on public opinion survey data sourced from the 2015 and 2019 Comparative National Election Project (CNEP) surveys. The CNEP is a South African nationally representative post-election survey fielded by Citizen Surveys soon after the May 2019 election and in early 2015 following the 2014 elections. The CNEP is a multi-national project conducted in over 30 countries that studies political communication and social structure within the context of election campaigns using compatible research designs and a common core of survey questions.²

The paper also draws on the 2018 South African Citizen Surveys (SACS), another nationally representative public opinion survey. The SACS has been carried out since 2015 on a quarterly basis by Citizen Surveys.

In addition, the paper draws on numerous published academic articles by this and other authors.

6) Voter turnout 1994-2019

Across South Africa's six democratic elections, voter turnout as a proportion of registered voters remained relatively high and stable. Since the 1999 elections, when turnout reached 89% of all registered voters, it declined to 77% in 2004 and 2009, to 73% in 2014, and again to 66% in 2019 (Figure 1).³

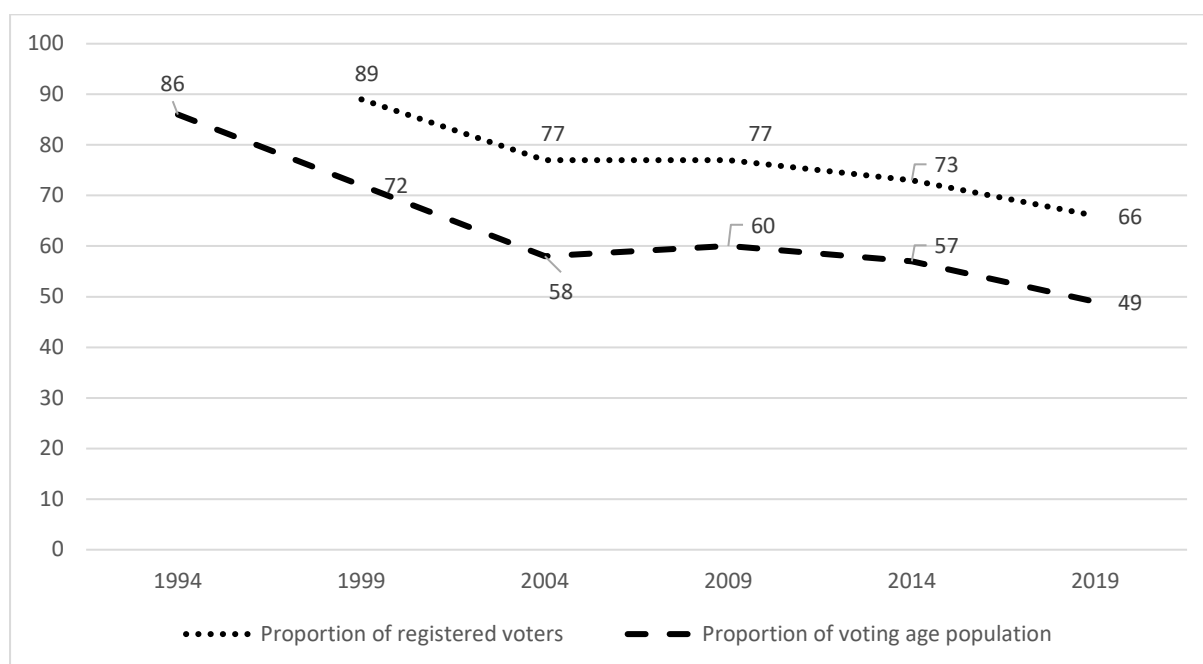
Today, the average turnout rate of registered South African voters falls within the global average. Worldwide, voter turnout started to decline in the early 1990's from a global average of 76% of registered voters to 66% by 2015, despite an increase in the global voter population and the spread of electoral democracy.⁴

A more accurate measure of voter turnout, however, is captured by the standard measure for voter turnout in cross-national research which calculates the number of people as a proportion of the eligible voting age population (the VAP).⁵ The VAP is understood as South African citizens aged 18 or older at the time of an election.

Turnout as a proportion of South Africa's VAP is far lower and confirms a growing gap between registered and unregistered voters and a subsequent decline in participation, from 86% in 1994, to 72% in 1999, to 58% in 2004, rising to 60% in 2009, to 57% in 2014, and then to 49% in 2019 (Figure 1). In other words, abstainers, understood as the percentage of eligible voters who do not vote at elections, continue to grow in South Africa. While abstainers constituted 40% of all eligible electorate in 2009, they rose to 43% in 2014, and again to 51% in the recent 2019 election.

So, by 2019 less than half of all eligible South Africans cast a vote. Moreover, voter turnout has dropped no less than 37 percentage points in the twenty-five years between the first democratic election in 1994 and 2019.

Figure 1: National voter turnout, 1994-2019, in percentages



7) Voter registration: Geography and demographics

Voter registration has increased over South Africa’s six consecutive democratic elections, adding approximately 2 million new voters at each election. The voters’ roll recorded a net growth of 1,366,499 voters (or 5%) since the 2014 elections. The voters’ roll has also grown by 47.2% since its establishment in 1999 when it recorded just over 18 million voters.⁶ However, the rate of registration has not kept pace with growth in the voting age population (VAP). The gap between registered and unregistered voters has increased steadily over time.

At the 2019 election, approximately 9 million eligible voters remained unregistered. Importantly, these unregistered citizens comprise a core of the non-voting public. Non-registration remains a key impediment to voter participation in South Africa.

This section explores non-registration with an emphasis on noticeable geographical differences and social group disparities in registration levels.

Provinces

From a provincial perspective, the largest registered voter populations are in Gauteng (6,381,220 million or 24% of the total voters’ roll), KwaZulu-Natal (5,524,666 or 21%), the Eastern Cape (3,363,161 or 13%), and the Western Cape (3,128,567 or 12%).

However, as a proportion each province’s eligible voter age population (VAP), provincial registrations show a different picture (Table 1). The Eastern Cape had the highest number of registered eligible voters (87%), followed by the Northern Cape (81%), and Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal (at 79% each), all predominantly rural provinces.

Some of the lowest levels of VAP registration are in fact found in the two highly populated and politically contested urban provinces of Gauteng (67%) and the Western Cape (72%). However, two

predominantly rural provinces stand out as conspicuous in their low registration rates: Mpumalanga (72%) and the North West (71%). Thus, these latter four provinces all share the common characteristic of having a third or slightly less of their voter age populations unregistered.

The only provinces that have increased their VAP registrations since the 2014 elections are the Eastern Cape (from 83% to 87%), and Limpopo (from 76% to 79%).⁷ Otherwise, the remaining provinces witnessed a steady decrease in overall VAP registration.

The voters' roll has grown by 47.2% since its establishment in 1999 when it recorded 18,172,751 voters.⁸ The provinces with the greatest percentage increase in registered voters from the early second democratic 1999 elections when registration commenced were the Western Cape (68%), Northern Cape (66%), KZN (60%) and Gauteng (53%).⁹

Table 1: VAP Registration, 2018 population estimates compared by province

Provinces	Registered voters	Province as % registered voters	VAP 2018 population estimates	% VAP registered by province
Eastern Cape	3,363,161	12.6	3,858,048	87.2
Free State	1,462,508	5.5	1,878,475	77.9
Gauteng	6,381,220	23.8	9,503,734	67.1
KwaZulu-Natal	5,524,666	20.6	7,031,592	78.6
Limpopo	2,608,460	9.7	3,317,455	78.6
Mpumalanga	1,951,776	7.3	2,723,851	71.7
North West	1,702,728	6.4	2,402,383	70.9
Northern Cape	626,471	2.3	778,406	80.5
Western Cape	3,128,567	11.7	4,374,246	71.5
Out of country	7,092			
National	26,756,649	100.0	35,868,190	74.6

Age

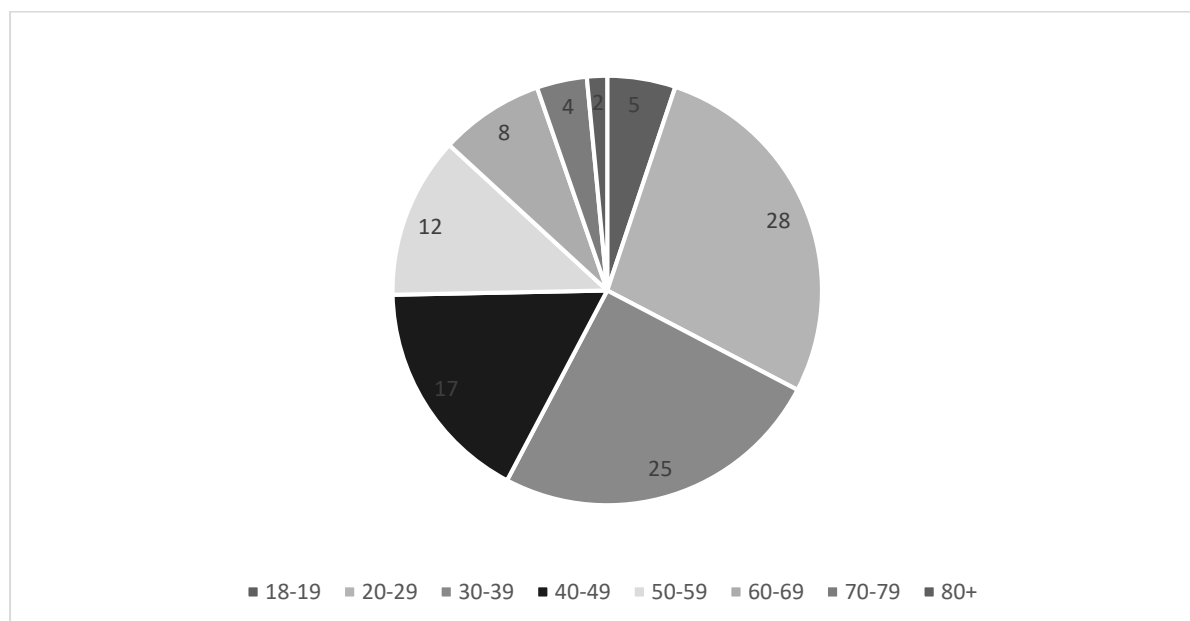
The most remarkable demographic differences in registration levels are across age groups. South Africa's population has expanded rapidly in recent decades, transforming the age distribution of the eligible electorate. A bulging youthful population has produced a significant proportion of young eligible voters. Despite their disproportionately larger numbers in the electorate young people register (and vote) at far lower rates than their older counterparts. According to Statistics South Africa's 2018 population estimates, there were approximately 11.7 million eligible voters in the 18–29 age group at the 2019 elections (see Table 2).

Table 2: VAP Registration, 2018 population estimates compared by age

Age groups	Registered voters	Age as % registered voters	VAP 2018 population estimates	Age as % VAP	% VAP registered
18-19	341,186	1.3	1,843,831	5.1	18.5
20-29	5,299,144	19.8	9,871,020	27.5	53.7
30-39	6,685,439	25.0	8,990,803	25.1	74.4
40-49	5,480,336	20.5	6,081,394	17.0	90.1
50-59	4,228,558	15.8	4,361,794	12.2	96.9
60-69	2,737,553	10.2	2,818,624	7.9	97.1
70-79	1,336,946	5.0	1,355,150	3.8	98.7
80+	647,487	2.4	545,574	1.5	118.7
Total	26,756,649	100.0	35,868,190	100.0	74.6

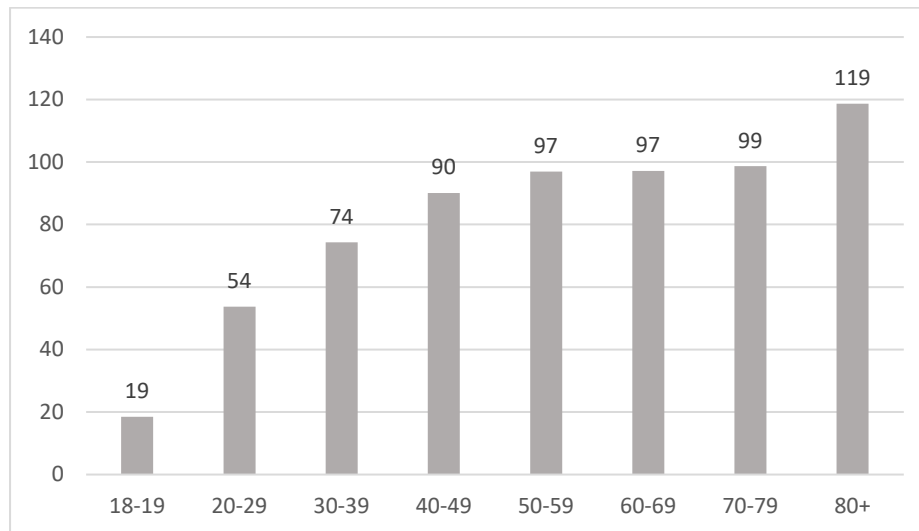
Figure 2 shows they constituted roughly a third (33%) of all eligible voters, demonstrating their overly disproportionate size within the electorate. People between 30–39 years old constituted 25% of all eligible voters and those between 40–49 years old made up only 17%. The proportions of age groups decline thereafter.

Figure 2: Age groups as a percentage of voting age population (VAP)



Despite their numerical dominance their registration levels were disproportionately low. Of 11.7 million young adult citizens only 5.6 million registered in the 18–29 age group. In other words, less than half (48.6%) were entitled to vote in 2019. This is a substantial decrease from the previous 2014 elections when well over half (58%) of all 18–29 year olds were registered to vote.¹⁰ Figure 3 shows the percentage of the VAP registered across different age groups and demonstrates the disproportionately low levels of youth registration in the country. Among the youngest (18–19-year-old) voters only 19% were registered (down from 33% in 2014) and just over half (54%) of 20–29 year olds were registered (down from 64% in 2014). Older groups had far higher registration rates, at over 90% among the oldest voters.¹¹

Figure 3: Percentage of VAP registered across age groups



Gender

There is also a noticeable gender gap in registration at the 2019 elections. The National Voters' Roll showed women remained slightly overrepresented at 55% of the total registered voter population. Statistics South Africa 2018 population estimated that women comprised 51% of the entire population.¹² The gap is more pronounced when measured as a proportion of eligible voters (registered and non-registered voters) of each gender. A far higher proportion of eligible women were registered than men. With 14,716,739 women registered to participate out of a population of eligible female voters of 19,288,188, this meant that 76% of all South African eligible women were registered (Table 3). A significantly smaller proportion of eligible men were registered to vote at 70%.¹³ The difference of 6% in registration creates an imbalance that disfavors men.

Provincial differences in the voter registration gap between men and women also confirm that men are under represented through registration across all provinces. Table 3 shows that across all provinces eligible women voters are the largest registered proportions, and not men. For example, the percentage difference in registration was substantially in women's favour in the provinces of Limpopo (12%), the Western Cape (8%) and the Northern Cape (7%).¹⁴ Table 4 also shows that as a percentage of the provincial total again women comprised a greater proportion of registered voters. Together, all this data suggests that men are less likely to participate on election day, across all the provinces. The turnout data in the next section confirms this.

Table 3: Registration by gender as proportions of eligible voters, by province, 2019.¹⁵

Female				Male			
Province	VAP	Registered	% of VAP registered	VAP	Registered	% of VAP registered	% difference in VAP registration
Eastern Cape	2,142,293	1,917,868	89.5	1,713,829	1,445,293	84.3	5.2
Free State	989,948	806,532	81.5	877,114	655,976	74.8	6.7
Gauteng	4,927,386	3,307,353	67.1	4,791,583	3,073,867	64.2	3.0
KwaZulu-Natal	3,803,976	3,115,942	81.9	3,109,414	2,408,724	77.5	4.4
Limpopo	1,928,588	1,548,805	80.3	1,548,009	1,059,655	68.5	11.9
Mpumalanga	1,496,898	1,066,410	71.2	1,369,347	885,366	64.7	6.6
North West	1,295,365	896,851	69.2	1,265,846	805,877	63.7	5.6
Northern Cape	407,077	336,075	82.6	385,738	290,396	75.3	7.3
Western Cape	2,296,587	1,717,237	74.8	2,105,485	1,411,330	67.0	7.7
Out of Country		3,666			3,426		
Total	19,288,188	14,716,739	76.3	17,166,365	12,039,910	70.1	6.2

Table 4: Registration by gender as proportions of provincial totals, 2019.¹⁶

Province	Female	% of provincial total	Male	% of provincial total	Provincial total	% of total
Eastern Cape	1,917,868	57.0	1,445,293	43.0	3,363,161	12.6
Free State	806,532	55.2	655,976	44.9	1,462,508	5.5
Gauteng	3,307,353	51.8	3,073,867	48.2	6,381,220	23.9
KwaZulu-Natal	3,115,942	56.4	2,408,724	43.6	5,524,666	20.7
Limpopo	1,548,805	59.4	1,059,655	40.6	2,608,460	9.8
Mpumalanga	1,066,410	54.6	885,366	45.4	1,951,776	7.3
North West	896,851	52.7	805,877	47.3	1,702,728	6.4
Northern Cape	336,075	53.7	290,396	46.4	626,471	2.3
Western Cape	1,717,237	54.9	1,411,330	45.1	3,128,567	11.7
Out of country	3,666	51.7	3,426	48.3	7,092	0.03
Total	14,716,739	55.0	12,039,910	45.0	26,756,649	

A glance at non-registration prior to the 2019 election

The *South African Citizens Survey* which was conducted nationally in late 2018 before the elections in May 2019 confirmed that young people were disproportionately less likely to register.¹⁷ This nationally representative pre-election survey found that 34% of 18–24 year olds indicated when asked that they do not intend to register while 32% of 25–34 year olds said the same. This is compared to 16% among 35–44 year olds.

The same *South African Citizens Survey* also revealed that men were least likely to register.

Across the LSM class measure (a measure of standard of living and disposable income) the least likely to register were among the working and lower middle classes and among urban metro dwellers, especially in Gauteng (which is supported by the low VAP/registration levels in Gauteng).

Of those who did not intend to register for the 2019 elections the vast majority were black South Africans (79%), followed by coloured (10%), white (9%) and Indian (2%) South Africans. This is broadly reflective of South Africa's racial composition.

In sum, **by virtue of non registration**, this pre-election survey revealed that **non-voters were most likely be young, male, black South African urbanites with a working income.**

** Policy considerations**

Registration drives – who to target?

Registration drives conducted by the Electoral Commission and political parties should focus on registration level disparities across provinces, with a specific focus on Gauteng, the Western Cape, Mpumalanga, and the North West.

Registration drives must prioritize young people below the ages of 35 years old.

Registration efforts must focus on gender disparities that disfavor men.

** Policy considerations**

Automatic registration – a policy option for South Africa?

One possible way to entice the increasing numbers of non-voters back to the polls is to reform the current voluntary and manual registration process towards a system of automatic registration (whilst maintaining voluntary voting) where the state assumes responsibility for registering eligible citizens. The costs (in terms of time, distance and money) involved to register may present obstacles that can be removed via reforms that could involve a merging of a civil register of eligible citizens via their national identity numbers held by the Department of Home Affairs with the National Common Voters' Roll.

In fact, the *South African Citizens Survey* (SACS) found that those who faced tangible registration challenges (including securing transport and time off work) tended to be overwhelmingly black African, young, female, working-class people, across metro and rural areas.¹⁸ Automatic registration should lessen the costs involved in voluntary registration, especially for young people many of whom are unemployed, for people in remote rural areas and economically marginalised people.

The increasing gap between registered and unregistered voters is of concern. This group is increasingly made up of young people. Of the the 9 million unregistered citizens, 6 million are young people under 30 years old. Young people do not initiate manual registration with the Electoral Commission, which requires all new voters to register in-person by visiting a polling station or a municipal election office.

Automatic registration might also generate incentives for political parties to cater to the policy interests of young people. There is a growing rift between politicians and young adults globally, described as 'not one of mutual contempt but rather of mutual neglect'.¹⁹ Politicians frequently do not bother with young people because so few vote.

Automatic registration may also have a positive effect on participation in the long term by encouraging voting. People who vote when they are young tend to remain active voters in the long term since voting becomes a learnt habit.²⁰

Automatic registration may also help to address the severe under representation of certain demographic groups at the polls who are currently inactive due to non registration. After all, elections claim their legitimacy through their ability to represent a broad distribution of societal views and interests.

8) Voter turnout by geography

This section explores the geographical profile of non-voters. The analysis uses voter turnout data made available by the *Electoral Commission* (IEC) and official census statistics from *Statistics South Africa* to show the turnout distribution by province among both the registered and eligible voter population. The analysis also examines voter turnout across the country's metropolitan municipalities and then compares the eight metros to rural areas in their respective provinces. This highlights geographical disparities in turnout at provincial and metro levels as well as a short comparison of urban centres versus rural areas.

The objective is to identify disproportionately larger potential pools of inactive voters by geography for future electoral mobilisation by political parties and other actors.

Provinces

Voter turnout among registered voters has declined across all provinces across the last four consecutive elections (Table 5). The sharpest declines over these years are in the Eastern Cape which dropped by 20% between 2004 and 2019, and Limpopo and the North West both by 18% in the same period. These are followed by the Free State (16%) and Mpumalanga (14%). In contrast, the smallest declines in registered voter turnout over the past fifteen years are found in Gauteng and the Western Cape (at 5% each) and KZN (6%).

The sharpest declines in turnout of registered voters are apparent between the most recent 2014 and 2019 elections and can be found in the Free State, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, while the smallest declines were in Gauteng and Limpopo.

From a political perspective, a noticeable pattern emerges. When comparing these figures to levels of electoral party competition across provinces it appears that the least politically competitive provinces have suffered the greatest voter withdrawal while provinces with higher levels of electoral contestation have greater participation among registered citizens.

Table 5: Turnout % registered voters 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 national ballots by province

Provinces	2004	2009	2014	2019	Decline between 2004 and 2019
Eastern Cape	81.1	76.7	70.3	61.0	20.1
Free State	78.9	76.9	72.5	62.8	16.1
Gauteng	76.4	79.0	76.5	71.8	4.6
KZN	73.5	79.9	76.9	67.3	6.2
Limpopo	77.1	69.6	63.3	58.7	18.4
Mpumalanga	80.3	80.4	75.7	66.1	14.2
North West	77.4	72.6	68.8	59.5	17.9
Northern Cape	76.0	75.9	73.8	66.6	9.4
Western Cape	73.1	77.8	74.4	68.2	4.9
National	76.7	77.3	73.5	66.0	10.7

In the most recent 2019 elections, Gauteng had the highest turnout of registered voters of all provinces followed by the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, again the three most contested provinces (see Tables 5 and 6). This confirms expectations that tight races and competitive elections encourage voters to the polls. It also reflects the shift evident in the previous 2014 elections when provinces with large urban centres increased their turnout relative to the large rural provinces.²¹ The lowest 2019 turnout rates were found in Limpopo, the North West and Eastern Cape, which also mirrors the 2014 trend.²² As noted above, these provinces have lost active voters disproportionately over the past two elections.

However, stepping back to the bigger picture, when voter turnout figures as a proportion of all eligible voters is calculated only three provinces attracted just over half their eligible voting age population to the polls at the 2019 national elections. The province with the highest level of

participation among its voting age population was in fact the sparsely populated Northern Cape province where just over half its eligible population cast a vote (53%), followed by the Eastern Cape and KZN (Table 6).

VAP turnout across the rest of the provinces in the 2019 national ballot turnout dropped to its lowest point in the North West (42%), Limpopo (46%) and Mpumalanga (47%), provinces with large ANC majorities. A glance at the same figures for provincial ballots cast shows a more dismal situation (Table 7).

The decline in turnout is most starkly portrayed in Table 8, which compares VAP turnout across the 2014 and 2019 national elections by province. Some provinces declined by almost a tenth or more between these consecutive elections; namely the Free State, the North West, KZN, and Mpumalanga.

Provincial declines are therefore unevenly spread across South Africa's provinces. It also appears that levels of electoral party competition within provinces may influence voter participation. The least politically competitive provinces, and provinces characterized by party dominance, tend towards higher abstentions whereas provinces with higher levels of electoral contestation during campaigns and multiparty representation in provincial legislatures are characterized by higher turnout (among registered voter populations).

This can be attributed to several factors. One reason may be that voters in provinces with large urban geographies have greater exposure to diverse and competitive election campaigns. This has slowed the decline in participation because these voters have a greater menu of political options, and are mobilised to turn out in higher proportions than their rural counterparts, who have less exposure to a diversity of political choices.

By contrast, the predominantly rural provinces continue to lose active voters due to the decline in the ANC's rural support base, which manifests in higher abstentions rather than vote shifting to a new political alternative. Provincial variations are also due in part to demographic differentiations (for example, provinces with higher numbers of young people should depress registration and participation levels) as well as specific regional political dynamics which may encourage or suppress turnout.

Table 6: Turnout, 2019 national ballot by province

Provinces	Registered voters	VAP 2018	Votes cast	Turnout registered %	Turnout VAP 2019 %
Eastern Cape	3,363,161	3,858,048	2,052,818	61.0	53.2
Free State	1,462,508	1,878,475	919,549	62.9	48.9
Gauteng	6,381,220	9,503,734	4,580,286	71.8	48.2
KZN	5,524,666	7,031,592	3,715,985	67.3	52.8
Limpopo	2,608,460	3,317,455	1,530,837	58.7	46.1
Mpumalanga	1,951,776	2,723,851	1,290,908	66.1	47.4
North West	1,702,728	2,402,383	1,012,250	59.5	42.1
Northern Cape	626,471	778,406	417,248	66.6	53.6
Western Cape	3,128,567	4,374,246	2,133,062	68.2	48.8
Out of country	7,092		19,909	N/A	N/A
National	26,756,649	35,868,190	17,672,851	66.0	49.3

Table 7: Turnout, 2019 provincial ballot by province

Provinces	Registered voters	VAP 2018 estimates	Votes cast	Turnout registered %	Turnout VAP%
Eastern Cape	3,363,161	3,858,048	2,001,262	59.5	51.9
Free State	1,462,508	1,878,475	897,185	61.4	47.8
Gauteng	6,381,220	9,503,734	4,357,348	68.3	45.8
KZN	5,524,666	7,031,592	3,654,701	66.2	52.0
Limpopo	2,608,460	3,317,455	1,470,222	56.4	44.3
Mpumalanga	1,951,776	2,723,851	1,233,544	63.2	45.3
North West	1,702,728	2,402,383	970,669	57.0	40.4
Northern Cape	626,471	778,406	401,663	64.1	51.6
Western	3,128,567	4,374,246	2,073,728	66.3	47.4
National	26,756,649	35,868,190	17,060,322	63.8	47.6

Table 8: Turnout % eligible voters (VAP) 2014 and 2019 national ballots by province.²³

Provinces	2014	2019	Decline between 2004 and 2019
Eastern Cape	58.2	53.2	5
Free State	60.8	48.9	11.9
Gauteng	56.1	48.2	7.9
KZN	63.0	52.8	10.2
Limpopo	47.8	46.1	1.7
Mpumalanga	56.9	47.4	9.5
North West	52.3	42.1	10.2
Northern Cape	60.5	53.6	6.9
Western Cape	56.2	48.8	7.4
National	57.1	49.3	7.8

Metropolitan centres

When we compare provincial turnout rates among registered voters to the metropolitan centres the latter show higher turnout rates. Whereas the Eastern Cape’s provincial turnout rate among its registered population was 61%, both its large metro centers - Buffalo City and Nelson Mandela Bay Metro (NMBM) - were higher at 66% and 67% respectively. The Free State’s provincial turnout rate was 63% while its metro, Manguang was 65%. The three metros that comprise Gauteng mirror its provincial turnout rate (72%) because the province is an urban hub with little rural expanse. KZN’s metro, eThekweni, is higher than the provincial average (67%) at 71%. The Western Cape’s average was 68% while the City of Cape Town was 70%. These figures show, once again, that urban populations are inclined to vote in greater proportions than their rural counterparts that live outside city perimeters.

When we compare province and metro turnout among eligible voters (VAP figures in Table 9, final column) this variance disappears. The turnout / VAP rates for metropolitan centres tend to mirror their respective turnout / VAP provincial averages. This is attributed to the relatively higher number of younger citizens who live in urban centres that remain unregistered. Their inclusion into the metro VAP figures effectively depresses the VAP turnout figures to the extent that the urban-rural difference in turnout disappears.

Table 9: Turnout, 2019 national ballot by metropolitan councils

Metros (Province)	Registered voters	VAP 2018 estimates	Votes cast	Turnout registered %	Turnout VAP%
Buffalo City (EC)	421.247	526.332	276.182	65.6	52.5
NMBM (EC)	607.134	824.368	404.253	66.6	49.0
Manguang (FS)	425.263	522.218	278.161	65.4	53.3
Ekurhuleni (G)	1.631.056	2.463.630	1.200.968	73.6	48.7
City of Jhb (G)	2.291.299	3.542.493	1.622.378	70.8	45.8
Tshwane (G)	1.557.224	2.388.910	1.132.461	72.7	47.4
eThekweni (KZN)	1.961.406	2.608.992	1.395.061	71.1	53.5
City of Cape Town (WC)	2.008.243	2.834.212	1.402.925	69.9	49.5
Totals & Averages	10.902.872	15.711.155	7.712.389	69.5 (National:)	50.0 (National:)

** Policy considerations**

Target young urban constituencies and target rural constituencies

Voters who live in provinces with higher levels of political competition, where the gap in election results for contesting political parties is narrower, and where voters perceive a tighter race, are more likely (if registered) to turnout to vote.

Political parties should continue to focus their campaign efforts at the large urban-based provinces to maintain the degree of strong multiparty competition that already exists, and to entice these provinces' younger populations to register in order to participate at the polls in far greater numbers.

However, and importantly, political parties should also focus their campaign efforts at the predominantly rural provinces, with large pools of registered and unregistered voters who increasingly decline to vote. These provinces are historically characterized by strong party loyalties to the ANC, party dominance in the provincial legislatures, poor penetration of opposition party electioneering, with the result of weak electoral competition. These voter populations have withdrawn from voting, possibly because they perceive the lack of an alternative political home, or they have grown disenchanted or disinterested in party politics.

9) Demographic profile of non-voters

This section explores the demographic and social group profile of South African non-voters in the 2019 elections. The analysis uses demographic voter turnout data made available by the *Electoral Commission* (IEC) and data from the CNEP 2019 post-election survey. Key demographics of interest include age, urban-rural location, gender, race and education. This section provides a simple, descriptive demographic profile of non-voters. The explanatory insights that underpin this descriptive view will be found in the next section that explores attitudinal motivations and perceptions of non-voters.

Age

After the 2019 elections, the IEC made turnout data by age groups publically available.²⁴ When we examine the actual votes cast across age groups for the 2019 elections as a proportion of registered voters in their respective age groups it becomes apparent that as people become older so turnout increases.

For example, among 20-29 year olds 56% of registered voters cast a vote whereas 83% of 60-69 years old did so. The exception appears to be the youngest age group (18-19 year olds). A startling 80% of those registered cast a vote.

However, this figure is considerably tempered when we consider turnout as a proportion of eligible voters in the respective age categories. Only 19% of all eligible 18-19 year olds actually registered (table 4 above) and only 15% of all eligible 18-19 year olds cast a vote (table 10 below). Only 30% of all eligible 20-29 year olds voted.

Research suggests that the impact of relatively lower registration and turnout rates among the youth, along with their disproportionately large size in the electorate, has had a profoundly

depressing effect on aggregate turnout.²⁵ The same research also argues that turnout among the young may be declining dynamically over time.²⁶

Trends suggest a trickle-up effect of learning the habit of *not* voting, as people move from one cohort to the next as they grow older. Turnout among young eligible is declining over time. Turnout / VAP among 18-19 year olds declined from 27% in 2014 to 15% in 2019 (a decline of 12%). Again, turnout among eligible 20-29 year olds declined from 46% in 2014 to 30% in 2019 (a decline of 16%). However, turnout among older groups has remained largely static over time.

Global studies show that young people everywhere are increasingly disinclined to turnout and vote, and South Africa is no different in this regard. However, the implications for countries where young people make up a sizeable proportion of the electorate, like South Africa, are ominous.

If turnout among young people continues to decline, while this cohort continues to expand, their lower turnout rates will further depress the country's aggregate turnout rate.

Table 10: VAP, Registration and Turnout by age

Age groups	Registered voters	VAP population estimates	2018 Turnout	Turnout as % of registered voters	Turnout as % of VAP
18–19	341,186	1,843,831	273,010	80.0	14.8
20–29	5,299,144	9,871,020	2,952,459	55.7	29.9
30–39	6,685,439	8,990,803	3,894,927	58.3	43.3
40–49	5,480,336	6,081,394	3,641,763	66.5	59.9
50–59	4,228,558	4,361,794	3,319,719	78.5	76.1
60–69	2,737,553	2,818,624	2,269,768	82.9	80.5
70–79	1,336,946	1,355,150	997,661	74.6	73.6
80+	647,487	545,574	323,544	50.0	59.3
Total	26,756,649	35,868,190	17,672,851	66.1	49.3

Nonetheless, despite low registration levels, the sheer number of young people who are registered ensure that they remain a significant potential influence at elections as they still constitute a large proportion of all registered voters. A breakdown of registration by age in 2014 and in 2019 reveals that 18– 29-year-olds comprised 25% and 21% respectively of all registered voters in those elections.

A cross tabulation of age and self-reported turnout using the 2019 post-election CNEP survey confirms the IEC data. The youngest groups are least likely to have reported that they turned out to vote while older age groups were most likely. The clear direction of the association between age and turnout is captured in the summary statistic which confirms a relatively strong correlation. In other words, self reported turnout in post-election surveys confirms the youngest citizens are most likely to be non-voters (Gamma: $-.362^{**}$).

Gender

The IEC also provide 2019 election turnout data by gender, making it possible to assess the turnout rate of women relative to men.²⁷ The notable registration differences (seen in the section above) already suggest that women were going to be more influential at the polls if they turned out to vote. The table below suggests that this materialized. Women comprised by 57% of all registered voters, while men comprised only 43%. Women also voted across all the provinces in higher proportions than men. The gender gap in turnout between men and women also widens as people get older. In other words, while only 10% more women voted in the youngest 18-19-year-old age group, by the 50 plus age group the gap is 16% and by 80 plus age group the gap is 38%. This is possibly due to higher mortality rates among men which usually occur at a younger age. Nevertheless, the gaps in the registration and turnout data by gender all suggest that men are more likely to be non-voters and this is especially the case among older men.

A cross tabulation of gender and voter turnout using the 2019 post-election CNEP survey confirms the IEC data. Men are least likely to have stated that they turned out to vote while women were most likely. The clear direction of the association between gender and turnout is captured in the summary statistic which confirms a low to medium strength measure of association. In other words, self reporting on turnout confirms men are most likely to be non-voters (Phi: -.108**).

Figure 4: Voter turnout by gender, 2019, in percentages

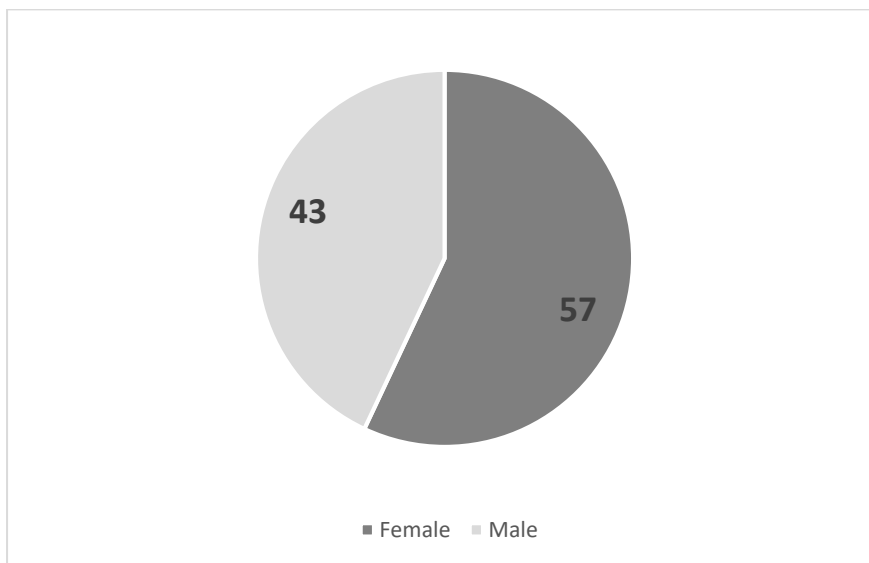


Table 11: Voter turnout by gender and age, 2019 elections.²⁸

Age groups	Female	%	Male	%	Total votes	Difference
18–19	150,793	55	122,217	45	273,010	10
20–29	1,681,488	57	1,270,970	43	2,952,459	14
30–39	2,185,042	56	1,709,885	44	3,894,927	12
40–49	2,028,865	56	1,612,898	44	3,641,763	12
50–59	1,929,219	58	1,390,500	42	3,319,719	16
60–69	1,317,287	58	952,481	42	2,269,768	16
70–79	611,303	61	386,358	39	997,661	22
80+	223,017	69	100,527	31	323,544	38
Total	10,127,015	57	7,545,836	43	17,672,851	14

Urban-rural location

There is no available demographic data on urban-rural location and turnout from the Electoral Commission. However, a cross tabulation of urban-rural location and voter turnout using the 2019 post-election CNEP survey confirms differences in voter turnout across these localities. Recall that the geographical analysis above shows that metros had slightly higher turnout rates among registered voters compared to their respective provincial turnout averages. Thus, urban voters based in the largest cities of South Africa are more inclined to vote in greater proportions than their respective counterparts that live outside the city perimeters and in rural areas. However, when turnout rates of all eligible voters (the VAP) are presented the gap disappeared. I attributed this to the relatively higher number of younger citizens who live in urban centres and are unregistered and therefore do not vote. Their inclusion into the VAP figures for metros effectively depresses the VAP turnout figures to the extent that the urban-rural difference in turnout is less noticeable.

A similar pattern emerges using the 2019 post-election survey data. At first glance, the data shows a higher turnout rate in rural areas compared to urban areas. When asked, 64% of rural voters reported having voted while 56% of urban voters reported having cast a vote (Phi. $-.068^{**}$). However, when a third control variable (age groups) is introduced as a layer variable (thus creating three-way table in which categories of the row and column variables are further subdivided by categories of the age group layer variable) it becomes clear that the relationship between turnout and urban-rural location is, in fact, affected by age. Suddenly, turnout among the youngest voters is much higher in rural areas and lower in urban areas. Self-reported turnout among 18-19 year olds in urban areas was 25% while it was 68% in rural areas. Similarly, self-reported turnout among 20-29 year olds in urban areas was 36% while it was 59% in rural areas. However, in older category the direction changes. Self-reported turnout among 40-49 year olds in urban areas was 65% while it was 56% in rural areas. And among 50-59 year olds in urban areas was 77% while it was 65% in rural areas. Thus, the high numbers of electorally inactive, young people in urban areas in the survey sample deflates the turnout rates for urban location while among older age groups the turnout rate appears to be higher in urban areas.

Education

Again, the analysis uses post-election survey data to explore the effects of education on turnout. A cross tabulation of education and voter turnout using the 2019 post-election CNEP survey shows a non linear relationship. While eligible voters with very low levels of formal education (no schooling or a primary schooling) were more likely to turnout to vote, this drops among people with secondary schooling but turnout increases again among people with higher levels of education. This U-shaped curve suggests that non-voters are predominantly found in the middle education categories where people have some or a full secondary school education. Voters are most likely found in the categories of people with very little formal education or with high levels of formal education. This non linear association is moderate in strength and statistically significant (Gamma: .118**).

Race

A cross tabulation of race and voter turnout using the 2019 post-election CNEP survey suggests that there is no obvious or statistically significant relationship. Self-reported voter turnout is evenly distributed across the four racial groups. Approximately 58% of black South African and Indian/Asian respondents reported having voted, while 60% of Coloured and 61% of white South Africans reported doing so too. It appears that non-voters are relatively evenly distributed across the various racial groupings in South Africa with no particular (dis)inclination to vote either way.

** Policy considerations**

Age appears to be the most important demographic explanation for the decline in voter participation in South Africa. Non-voters are predominantly made up of young people. South Africa's political elites should focus on policy preferences and political views that resonate with young people. And they should focus specifically on the youth living in the large metropolises.

Men are more likely to be non-voters and this is especially the case among older men. Political parties need to explore policy positions that are potentially attractive to this demographic group to entice them to the polls.

The relationship between education and turnout appears to be complex and may be motivated by a number of attitudinal factors that are given consideration below.

The null relationship between turnout and race suggests that simplistic racial explanations will not help us to understand why many South Africans choose not to vote. Moreover, any effort to mobilise people based on ascriptive identities will be unsuccessful. Racial politicking is yet to find serious traction in terms of enticing people to the polls.

10) Attitudinal profile of non-voters

This section explores a number of explanations for why South Africans choose not to vote. The research examines explanatory factors for non-participation by exploring the attitudes and perceptions of all eligible voters in South Africa using public opinion survey data from the Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP) post-elections surveys, conducted after the 2014 general elections and the 2019 general elections. Therefore, this section provides a quantitative analysis of the attitudes of non-voters across two recent consecutive elections.

The statistical model – predicting the decision not to vote

Any analysis of public opinion data should be informed by sound theoretical reasoning. This section therefore draws on the latest scholarly work that cite widely accepted reasons for declining participation in South Africa and elsewhere. The predictors for voter turnout are selected based on its theoretical ability to explain (non)voting. The indicators or question items are all standard measures used in voter behaviour studies globally. The logistic regression model establishes the relative contribution of each indicator by estimating the unique, independent contribution of each of these factors to explain whether an eligible South African citizen voted or not.

Resources and psychological engagement in politics

The literature points to a range of psychological factors that increase or decrease the chances of participating at the polls. Education, income and socio-economic status are said to affect the decision to vote by transforming the individual voter's capacities by offering money, time and civic skills (resources).²⁹ At the same time, these social-structural factors are also important because they shape the cognitive skills and motivational attitudes that people bring to the electoral process, such as their civic orientations, political efficacy, political interest and party identification.³⁰ In other words, economic development and social modernisation transforms societies with important consequences for participation.

In South Africa, the resource and psychological engagement models pose real possibilities. Since the end of apartheid, education has become more accessible for millions of South Africans, and the tertiary sector continues to increase its intake of previously disadvantaged young South Africans. The democratic transition has produced an expanding black middle class, with concomitant increases in wage income.³¹ Thus, economic development and social modernization processes since the end of apartheid should have improved many voters' material capacities and cognitive skills, subsequently changing their orientation to voting. As levels of education and income increase so too should levels of interest in politics and the cognitive skills of the electorate to engage with each other, and with a wider range of political news via media. This should in turn increase levels of turnout among more educated, wealthier voters. Thus, socio-economic change (through education and greater media usage) should alter levels of political interest and efficacy among a section of the population, with a positive impact on participation.³² On the other hand, deepening poverty and inequality may have also produced greater psychological and material disengagement from politics. Unemployment and poverty have worsened and entrenched a large economic underclass, perpetuating deep structural inequalities in the society.³³

The findings in Table 12 suggest that two factors drive psychological engagement in politics – namely an interest in the election campaign and party identification. Both also help to explain why many people refrain from voting, even when a statistical model 'controls' for other important predictors of turnout.

Interest in the election campaign

If South Africans were interested in the 2014 and 2019 election campaigns and followed them regularly during the pre-election period, they were more likely to turn out to vote in these elections. In contrast, people who did not express any interest in the election campaigns were more likely to abstain from voting altogether.

A decline in partisanship between 2014 and 2019

Globally, partisanship provides voters with a psychological anchor into the political world. Party identification binds people to a preferred party and mobilises them to cast a vote.³⁴ In other words, this long-standing loyalty towards a political party generates a strong motivation to vote. However, modernization processes, exposure to increasingly competitive party campaigns, and to news media, has decreased the reliance on traditional party loyalties as an election mobilizer across most democracies.³⁵

Party loyalties, especially towards the ANC, have dominated the decision to vote across most of South Africa's democratic elections. However, in recent years, party loyalties have weakened in South Africa, much like they have across many advanced industrial societies. Numerous surveys indicate that a growing segment of the South African electorate lack an affiliation or bias towards any political party.³⁶

Table 12 shows that at the 2014 elections party identification affected voter turnout in exactly the way we might expect. As people move each unit, from the non-partisan category towards being a strong party identifier, the odds of turning out to vote increased. By the 2019 election the data in Table 12 suggests that party identification was less influential vis-à-vis other important predictors. This seems to corroborate other recent research which found that a decline in partisanship before the 2019 elections caused higher than usual abstentions.³⁷ Non partisans are less likely to vote than partisans. And with an increasing number of non partisans in the South African electorate partisan-centered voting declined.

Non partisans – potential vote switchers

Partisanship binds people to a preferred party. As these ties weaken, people should become more likely to shift their party support between elections as they react to the flow of events rather than choose based on habitual party loyalties. So although non-partisans are harder to mobilize at elections, they are more open to persuasion and shifting their vote across parties. Their increased numbers in the South African electorate should have therefore increased the numbers of abstainers, as discussed in the previous section, but also the likelihood of vote shifting.

There is mounting longitudinal evidence to suggest that South Africans do shift their votes across parties. The National Elections Project (CNEP) post-election surveys, held in South Africa after the 2004, 2009 and 2014 elections, found an increasing percentage of respondents who declared that they supported a different political party across elections: 8% reported switching their vote choice between the 1999 and 2004 elections, 12% between 2004 and 2009, and 15% between 2009 and the 2014 elections.³⁸ In 2019, the proportion of party switchers declines slightly to 13%. So, who are these potential non-partisan voter switchers?

First, it is important to note that non-partisans, although harder to mobilise than partisans at elections, do vote. The 2019 CNEP survey data shows that 78% of respondents who declared themselves to be non-partisan (e.g. no loyalty to any particular party) cast a vote in 2019. This is compared to 84% of partisans who participated¹. While turnout among non-partisans is lower

¹ This sentence compares turnout of partisans to non-partisans and indicates that partisans are more likely to vote than non-partisans. In other words, of all the partisans in the sample 84% voted. Of all the non-partisans, only 78% voted. These

than partisans, as expected, non-partisans do participate at the polls and are important potential swing voters. Non-partisans are overwhelmingly found in metro areas - as opposed to rural areas. Of all non-partisans, 76% reside in cities or within large metro boundaries. There is a relatively equal distribution of non-partisans across gender. In terms of age, almost half (49%) of all non-partisans are under the age of 35 years old. The majority of non-partisans live in Gauteng (27%) and KZN (25%) and the Western Cape (15%). The rests are scattered across the remaining provinces with the largest groups in Limpopo (9%), Eastern Cape (7%) and Mpumalanga (6%).

In line with South Africa's demographic composition, of all non-partisans the vast majority are black South Africans (69%). And of all black South Africans surveyed over a third (35%) are self-declared non-partisans, which numerically speaking, constitutes a large number of eligible potential voters. In comparison, 45% of all Coloured South Africans, 72% of Indian and 62% of whites are self-declared partisans.

In summary, the majority of non partisans are young adults, live in urban areas, mostly in the most populated provinces of Gauteng and KZN and the Western Cape, and most are black South Africans.

Political efficacy

A citizen's perceptions of their personal effectiveness in politics is referred to as a 'sense of political efficacy'. It captures the individual's subjective belief that one can influence the political process.³⁹ People who have a sense of political efficacy are more likely to participate in politics.⁴⁰ If citizens believe that they can influence political outcomes they will be more inclined to stay informed and vote at elections.

Political efficacy has two complimentary dimensions – internal political efficacy and external political efficacy. Internal efficacy refers to personal subjective political competence - the personal ability of the individual to understand politics and influence politics. External efficacy refers to perceptions of government responsiveness and officials' attentiveness – the extent to which the political system (political authorities and institutions) is responsive to citizens' demands.⁴¹ Both appear to matter to the decision to vote or not in South Africa.

The 2015 survey data in Table 12 shows that if a person has a low level of internal political efficacy they tend not to vote. In other words, if someone felt that s/he had no influence over what government does, they were less likely to cast a vote. Conversely, people with a stronger sense of internal political efficacy (e.g. they perceived that they could influence government outcomes) were more likely to vote. However, by 2019, there is evidence of external political efficacy shaping the decision not to vote. If people felt the political system was unresponsive (politicians do not care what people like me think) they were less likely to vote.

Mobilisation agents: spouses/ partners and organisational membership

People vote because they are mobilized to do so by the political communication they receive via their informal social networks (especially those they live with such as a spouse or life partner) and through organisational membership to political parties and group networks like churches, voluntary associations and trade unions.

figures are not about overall turnout, but about turnout within these two groups. Also, survey data always over estimates turnout because survey respondents are over report that they voted - social desirability effects. Thus, all surveys over-estimate turnout and it will be higher than actual turnout as reported by the electoral commission.

The data in Table 12 suggests that non-voters are indeed disengaged from these crucial mobilizing agents and therefore lack exposure to their mobilisation effects, and remain less informed and less interested at elections. If a person is a member of an organization, they were more likely to vote in the 2019 elections, suggesting some mobilising effects of church attendance and union membership which are both widespread among South Africa's population. The mobilisation efforts of their leaders at elections may be key drivers of turnout.

Moreover, in line with global findings, the 2014 and 2019 data both show that a respondent's behaviour conforms closely to the spouse/partner's inclination to abstain or vote. A respondent is far more likely to vote if their spouse/partner did the same in both elections.

Table 12: Voter turnout: Sociological factors, partisanship, government evaluations, political efficacy, mobilisation factors, and campaign interest

DV: Turnout (0) Did not vote (1) voted			95% CI for Odds ratio (Exp B)		
Variables	B (SE)	Sig.	Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
2015 survey (2014 elections)					
Intercept	-5.255 (.796)	.000		.005	
Campaign Interest	.542 (.093)	.000	1.432	1.719	2.063
Strength of PID	.294 (.070)	.000	1.170	1.342	1.539
National govt performance	.057 (.077)	.461	.910	1.059	1.232
No influence over govt	.213 (.078)	.006	1.061	1.237	1.441
Politics too complicated	.000 (.085)	1.000	.847	1.000	1.180
Politicians don't care (System responsiveness)	.054 (.092)	.560	.880	1.055	1.265
Organisational Membership	-.242 (.170)	.155	.563	.785	1.096
Spouse turnout (ref)		.000			
Spouse Turnout(1)	2.714 (.492)	.000	5.751	15.093	39.614
Spouse Turnout(2)	1.781 (.464)	.000	2.389	5.934	14.742
Race - Black (1)	.874 (.300)	.004	1.333	2.398	4.313
Indian (2)	.673 (.540)	.212	0.681	1.961	5.651
Colored (3)	.351 (.376)	.351	0.679	1.420	2.969
White (4) (ref)		.015			
Education	.078 (.064)	.219	.955	1.081	1.225
Age	.046 (.007)	.000	.1.034	1.047	1.061
Cases: 1101. $R^2 = .222$ (Cox and Snell). $.327$ (Nagelkerke). Model χ^2 (14) = 279.176. $p < .000^{***}$					
2019 survey (2019 elections)					
Intercept	-.2.429 (.530)	.000		.088	
Campaign Interest	.366 (.054)	.000	1.298	1.442	1.602
Strength of PID	.007 (.050)	.881	.914	1.007	1.110
National govt performance	-.118 (.051)	.021	.803	.888	.983
No influence over govt	.053 (.048)	.271	.959	1.055	1.159
Politics too complicated	-.112 (.050)	.026	.810	.894	.986
Politicians don't care (System responsiveness)	.198 (.056)	.000	1.092	1.219	1.362
Organisational Membership	-.416 (.124)	.001	.518	.660	.840
Spouse turnout (ref)		.002			
Spouse Turnout(1)	1.102 (.328)	.001	1.583	3.011	5.727
Spouse Turnout(2)	1.043 (.310)	.001	1.547	2.838	5.207
Race - Black (1)	.073 (.221)	.742	.697	1.076	1.659
Indian (2)	-.083 (.290)	.774	.521	.920	1.625
Colored (3)	-.202 (.388)	.959	.458	.980	2.097
White (4) (ref)		.899			
Education	-.030 (.037)	.418	.902	.970	1.044
Age	.043 (.005)	.000	1.035	1.044	1.054
Cases 1447. $R^2 = .152$ (Cox and Snell). $.205$ (Nagelkerke). Model χ^2 (13) = 56.105. $p < .000^{***}$					

Evaluations of government performance

Trust in democratic institutions and evaluations of government's performance have all fallen in recent years in South Africa. The 2019 data shows that citizen evaluations of government's national performance had an effect on voter turnout, but in a surprising direction. Negative evaluations of national government's overall performance are associated with turning out to vote. In other words, if people perceived government's overall performance to be poor the more likely they were to vote. Poor performance motivated turnout and visa versa.

Elections are meant to provide the electorate with a mechanism for accountability over political actors. That people tend to turn out to vote when they are dissatisfied with the recent performance of national government suggests that South African's do use elections as a sanctioning device.

Young people: the new non-voter

Age is statistically significant across both elections years in Table 12. In line with the age based analysis in previous sections, this statistical model confirms that age of an individual remains a profound explanation for voter turnout in South Africa. It also helps to explain the overall decline in voter participation at recent elections.

Young South Africans, like young people elsewhere, are in all probability less likely to vote, because they are harder to mobilise. Recent research indicates that young South Africans differ systematically from older counterparts in several important ways, which may account for their higher abstentions.⁴² Young people are less likely to have developed enduring attachments to political parties and are not guided to the polls by strong party loyalties. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that young people are mobilized through the institutions they frequent. The mobilisation effects from their social networks, or the organisations they belong to, and the media on young people are much weaker.

Instead, the same research found that they rely on current, short-term political and economic evaluations when deciding whether to vote or not. Education also mattered. Young people who had a tertiary education, and who expressed an interest in politics were more likely to vote. This suggests a group of cognitively engaged young citizens who frequent the polls. In contrast, a poor sense of personal political competence (internal political efficacy) depressed turnout among younger voters. Moreover, if a young person perceived low levels of responsiveness from elected officials (external political efficacy) they were less likely to participate.

It may also be that young South Africans are less interested in formal politics and hold a weaker sense of civic duty towards conventional forms of participation compared to older generations. In other words, as generational replacement occurs and younger voters enter the electorate in bigger proportions, turnout levels have dropped significantly precisely because young people are harder to mobilise.⁴³

These findings support earlier findings from the Voter Participation Survey, conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council for the IEC. The 2019 IEC report indicates that one's *duty to vote* and *internal and external efficacy* items as well as *trust and confidence in institutions and actors* all helped explain turnout.⁴⁴

Non-voters versus inter-party vote shifters

Citizen trust in political institutions has declined significantly in recent years. The mounting trust deficit has affected many state institutions but has especially affected the ruling African National Congress party. Trust in the ANC dropped from 62% in 2006 to 38% in 2018.

Revelations of the alleged involvement of ANC officials in state capture and corruption has undoubtedly had a profound impact on voter sentiments, deterring many traditional ANC supporters from voting for the governing party in recent elections. This should have left many more voters able and willing move their support to other opposition parties, and thus participate at elections.

Yet, a substantial portion of South Africans do not regard opposition parties as viable alternatives to the ANC. Voters are unable to identify a “credible” party in order to move their support and, ultimately, cast a vote. Research shows that if an ANC voter grows disillusioned and distances himself from his/her previous political home, distrust or disaffection with an incumbent or opposition party does not necessarily translate into a vote against them.⁴⁵ These voters are most likely to become inactive at elections and simply move into the non-participatory electorate, depressing turnout further. The data analysis below provides some insight into non-voters’ perceptions of opposition parties and reveals attitudes that may present obstacles to inter-party movement.

The first clue is found in a simple cross tabulation between an item which asks respondents, *“Thinking of the most important problem facing South Africa (unemployment for most) how well or badly would you say the ANC government handled that issue over the previous year, that is 2018 to 2019?”* and another item which asks respondents *“Could any other political party have done a better job than the government in handling this issue?”*. Of the respondents who thought government had handled this most important issue poorly, 65% did not think that any other party could do a better job (Phi. -.179**). Moreover, the majority of respondents occupied this category.

Vote shifting relies on the majority of black South Africans to perceive opposition parties as genuine alternatives. Yet, the data suggests that opposition parties will need to work that much harder to present themselves as such. For example, the vast majority (69%) of black South Africans rated the ANC’s handling of unemployment very poorly or poorly in the year before the 2019 elections and yet 73% of black South Africans did not think any other political party could have done a better job than the government in terms of unemployment.

Views of opposition parties and their leaders among black South Africans do not fare well either. At least 38% of black South Africans expressed a strong dislike for the Democratic Alliance and 33% for the Economic Freedom Fighters – the two largest opposition parties, both led by black African candidates at the time of the 2019 elections. At least 36% of black South Africans expressed a strong dislike for the DA’s leader at the time, Mmusi Maimane, and 32% expressed the same for EFF leader Julius Malema.

Similarly, when asked if the DA looks after the interests of all South Africans, or one group only, 32% of black South Africans thought the DA was representative while 37% thought it tended towards one group only (mostly perceived as white South Africans). When asked the same about the EFF 40% of black South Africans thought the EFF was representative while 25% thought it tended towards one group only (mostly perceived as black South Africans).

Arguably, the views presented above could be skewed by partisan loyalties and by racial identities thereby obscuring the real effects. To control for these factors, the dataset selected only black South Africans and then examines views of parties and leaders among black non-partisans only – unquestionably the most significant group of voters for meaningful vote shifting in future South African elections.

Firstly, 35% of all black South Africans states that they do not feel close to any political party – numerically this potential pool of voters remains key to interparty party movement – but remain difficult to mobilise because they are non-partisan. Yet, 78% non-partisan black South Africans do not think any other political party could have done a better job than government handling the unemployment issue.

Among the same group of black African non-partisans, 34% expressed a clear dislike of the DA (15% expressed a clear liking for the DA), while 32% expressed a clear dislike of the EFF (19% expressed a clear liking for the EFF). These figures about the two major opposition parties are revealing. There is roughly a fifth of black African non-partisans who are ‘available voters’ and did express a liking for either the DA or EFF. At the same time, however, a third expressly disliked these parties and are unlikely to vote for them. Many more voters remain ambivalent about both parties. Only small minorities of non-partisan black South Africans expressed some degree of inclination for either party.

Until opposition parties can position themselves as credible and viable governing alternatives many South Africans will continue to abstain from voting, perceiving few alternatives across the political spectrum.

** Policy considerations**

The election campaign is an important vehicle for mobilizing voters. Greater effort should be made to capture and hold the attention of potential voters during the campaign season through the use of media and other strategies.

The increasing number of non-partisans in the electorate will reduce the number of voters who are easily mobilized by their party loyalties. Political parties will need to advance attractive policy platforms and leadership qualities to entice non-partisan voters. Parties should also capitalize on discontent with the performance of incumbent parties since this appears to provide an incentive to vote. However, this still needs to be coupled with attractive policy platforms and leadership qualities for it to be a successful strategy.

Much depends on the ability of political parties to entice young voters to the polls. Since young people do not hold traditional long-standing party loyalties, these cannot be harnessed as mobilising tools. Parties will need to work that much harder to appeal to this potential group of voters to come to the polls. Assertive policy platforms that speak to the particular needs and interests of young citizens are critical to engaging the interest of this very large pool of potential (but currently inactive) voters. Furthermore, incumbent parties will do well to focus on how their political and economic performances are evaluated by these youngsters while opposition parties will need to focus on building convincing candidate and leadership perceptions.

Many young South Africans still lack the prerequisites that build a strong sense of internal political efficacy, in all probability due to low levels of, and access to, quality formal education. This may negatively shape citizenship traits and political involvement. Moreover, perception that the political system is nonresponsive is also producing a serious impediment to voting. Together, these findings suggest that political actors need to embed a strong notion of 'civic mindedness' and the importance of 'civic participation'. At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, political parties need to urgently and directly confront and address the growing discontent with conventional democratic politics among young people as a root cause of their disengagement with electoral politics.

Finally, a substantial portion of South Africans voters remain unattached to political parties and are potentially available to be mobilised at elections but remain abstainers. Some may be disgruntled ANC partisans who have moved away from their previous political home. Others may be young voters who have never held a party affiliation. Nevertheless, many of these abstainers do not regard opposition parties as credible and viable political homes. Perceptions about opposition parties in particular are often perceived as narrow and racially defined. This remains a serious impediment to inter-party movement and therefore to voter participation.

11) Conclusion

Although registration increased to 26.7 million voters in the 2019 elections, with over 9 million unregistered, the rate of registration has failed to keep pace with the growth of the voting age population in South Africa. The increasing gap between registered and unregistered voters is concerning and reflects the Electoral Commission's incapability to ensure widespread registration. Automatic registration, where government institutions assume some responsibility for registering eligible citizens, may help to address this.

In the absence of automatic registration, registration drives by the Electoral Commission and political parties are a critical intervention to close the widening gap between registered and unregistered voters and these should focus primarily on provinces with lower levels of VAP registration. Registration drives must prioritize young people below the ages of 35 years old and must increase efforts to encourage men to register.

Turnout rates reflect the disparities found in registration rates. Mobilisation efforts to turnout to vote by political parties and other organizations should target young urban constituencies and rural constituencies in particular. Given that most non-voters are young people, South Africa's political elites should focus their attention on policy preferences and political views that resonate with young people.

The election campaign provides an important vehicle for mobilizing voters. Greater effort should be made to capture the attention of all potential voters during the campaign season through the use of media and other strategies. Given that traditional party loyalties are on the decline political parties also need to design attractive campaigns around policy choices and issue politics that resonate with the majority of citizens. Candidate and leadership qualities are also increasingly important to entice non-voters back to the polls. Perhaps the most important issue to address is the growing discontent with conventional democratic politics among young people as a root cause of their disengagement with electoral politics.

Finally, over half of South Africa's eligible voters chose to abstain in the 2019 elections. Many of these voters may preferred not to vote, but many may have wanted to but failed to identify a political home that resonated. All political parties, but especially opposition parties require a moment of introspection about how they are perceived by the broader electorate. Negative evaluations of opposition parties in terms of who and what they represent, notwithstanding party affiliations, remains a serious impediment to voter participation.

¹¹ The 2019 National and Provincial elections report. published by IEC. p. 53. Download the report at:
<http://www.elections.org.za/content/default.aspx>

² The South African surveys were conducted nationally following the 2014 and 2019 elections and each includes at least 1,300 personal interviews. The samples were drawn using multi-stage, stratified, area cluster, probability sampling. The overall design of the survey fieldwork was coordinated by the co-Principal Investigators, Dr. Collette Schulz-Herzenberg (Stellenbosch University) and Professor Robert Mattes (University of Strathclyde / University of Cape Town). More information about the global CNEP project can be viewed at:
<https://u.osu.edu/cnep/>.

³ There are no voter turnout figures for the first democratic elections in 1994 because voters were unregistered.

⁴ Abdurashid Solijonov, Voter turnout trends around the world, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2016. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf>, p. 24.

⁵ Pippa Norris, *The Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 41; Mark N. Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, New York, Cambridge University Press, p. 86-7; Also see <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/vr/vra/vra09>

⁶ The 2019 National and Provincial elections report. published by IEC. p. 53.
<http://www.elections.org.za/content/default.aspx>

⁷ For 2014 VAP registration by province see Collette Schulz-Herzenberg. 'Trends in electoral participation 1994–2014'. in Collette Schulz-Herzenberg and Roger Southall (eds). *Election 2014 – South Africa: The Campaigns. Results and Future Prospects*. Johannesburg. Jacana Media. 2014. p. 23.

⁸ The 2019 National and Provincial elections report. published by IEC. p. 53.
<http://www.elections.org.za/content/default.aspx>

⁹ Data provided by IEC to author in May 2019.

¹⁰ Schulz-Herzenberg. 'Trends in electoral participation'. p. 22.

¹¹ The 80+ group is subject to a discrepancy between actual registration figures and population estimates due to the slow removal of deceased persons.

¹² Statistics South Africa. 2018. *Stats in brief*. available at:
<http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/StatsInBrief/StatsInBrief2018.pdf>. accessed 7 March 2019.

¹³ Amanda Gouws, The gender gap and the 2019 elections, in Schulz-Herzenberg, C., and Southall, R. eds. 2019. *Election 2019: Change and Stability in South Africa's Democracy*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media. p. 155.

¹⁴ Gouws, *ibid*.

¹⁵ Gouws, p. 155

¹⁶ 2019 National and Provincial elections report. published by IEC. p. 53.
<http://www.elections.org.za/content/default.aspx>

¹⁷ The author thanks Citizen Surveys for making the South African Citizen Survey (SACS) core reports available. The SACS has been carried out since 2015. Face-to-face interviews are conducted with a nationally representative, multi-stage stratified probability sample of 3,900 adult South African respondents on a quarterly basis. See South African Citizens Survey Core Report, Quarter 4, 2018, p. 34.

¹⁸ South African Citizens Survey Core Report, Quarter 4, 2018, p. 36.

¹⁹ Wattenberg, Martin. P. 2016. *Is Voting for Young People?* Fourth edition 2016. New York: Routledge, p. 2.

²⁰ Franklin, *Voter Turnout*, 2004.

²¹ Schulz-Herzenberg. 'Trends in electoral participation'. p. 26.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ The VAP statistics by provinces are not available for years 2004 and 2009 and are therefore excluded from the table and analysis.

²⁴ 2019 National and Provincial elections report. published by IEC. p. 67.
<http://www.elections.org.za/content/default.aspx>

²⁵ Collette Schulz-Herzenberg. 2019. "The New Electoral Power Brokers: Macro and Micro Level Effects of 'Born-free' South Africans on Voter Turnout." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 57 (3): 363-389.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ 2019 National and Provincial elections report. published by IEC. p. 7.
<http://www.elections.org.za/content/default.aspx>

²⁸ 2019 National and Provincial elections report. published by IEC. p. 67.
<http://www.elections.org.za/content/default.aspx>

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- ²⁹ Andre Blais. 2009. "Turnout in Elections." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behaviour*, edited by Russell Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, 622-635. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 630.
- ³⁰ Pippa Norris. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 255.
- ³¹ Roger Southall. 2016. *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*. James Curry, p. 42.
- ³² Russell J. Dalton. 2014. *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, p. 24.
- ³³ *Poverty Trends in South Africa: An examination of absolute poverty between 2006 and 2015*, Statistics South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa, 2017. <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-06/Report-03-10-062015.pdf>.
- ³⁴ Dalton, *Citizen Politics*, 192-197.
- ³⁵ Bingham Powell, 1980. "Voting Turnout in Thirty Democracies: Partisan, Legal, and Socio-Economic Influences". In *Political Participation*, edited by Richard Rose, 5-34. London: Sage Publications. P. 29.
- ³⁶ Collette Schulz-Herzenberg. 2019. "The Decline in Partisan Voting and the Rise of Electoral Uncertainty in South Africa's 2019 General Elections." *Politikon Special Issue: the 2019 elections*. Pp. 1-19.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ The year percentage is the proportion of CNEP survey respondents who declared that they voted at the elections and state different vote choices in the and the immediately preceding election at national levels. E.g. Of all the citizens who cast a vote in 2014, 15% shifted their vote across consecutive elections.
- ³⁹ Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin and Warren Edward Miller. 1954. *The Voter Decides*, Evanston, Ill., Row Peterson, p. 187.
- ⁴⁰ Dalton, *Citizen Politics*, p. 71.
- ⁴¹ Craig, S. C., Niemi, R. G., and Silver, G. E. 1990. Political efficacy and trust: A report on the NES pilot study items. *Political behavior*, 12(3), 289-314; Weatherford, M. Stephen. 1992. "Measuring Political Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review* 86 (1): 149-166, p. 153.
- ⁴² Schulz-Herzenberg, C. 2019a. "The New Electoral Power Brokers: Macro and Micro Level Effects of 'Born-free' South Africans on Voter Turnout." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 57 (3): 363-389.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ The 2019 National and Provincial elections report. published by IEC. p. 15-17. <http://www.elections.org.za/content/default.aspx>
- ⁴⁵ Schulz-Herzenberg, 'Trends in electoral participation 1994-2014', p. 64.

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