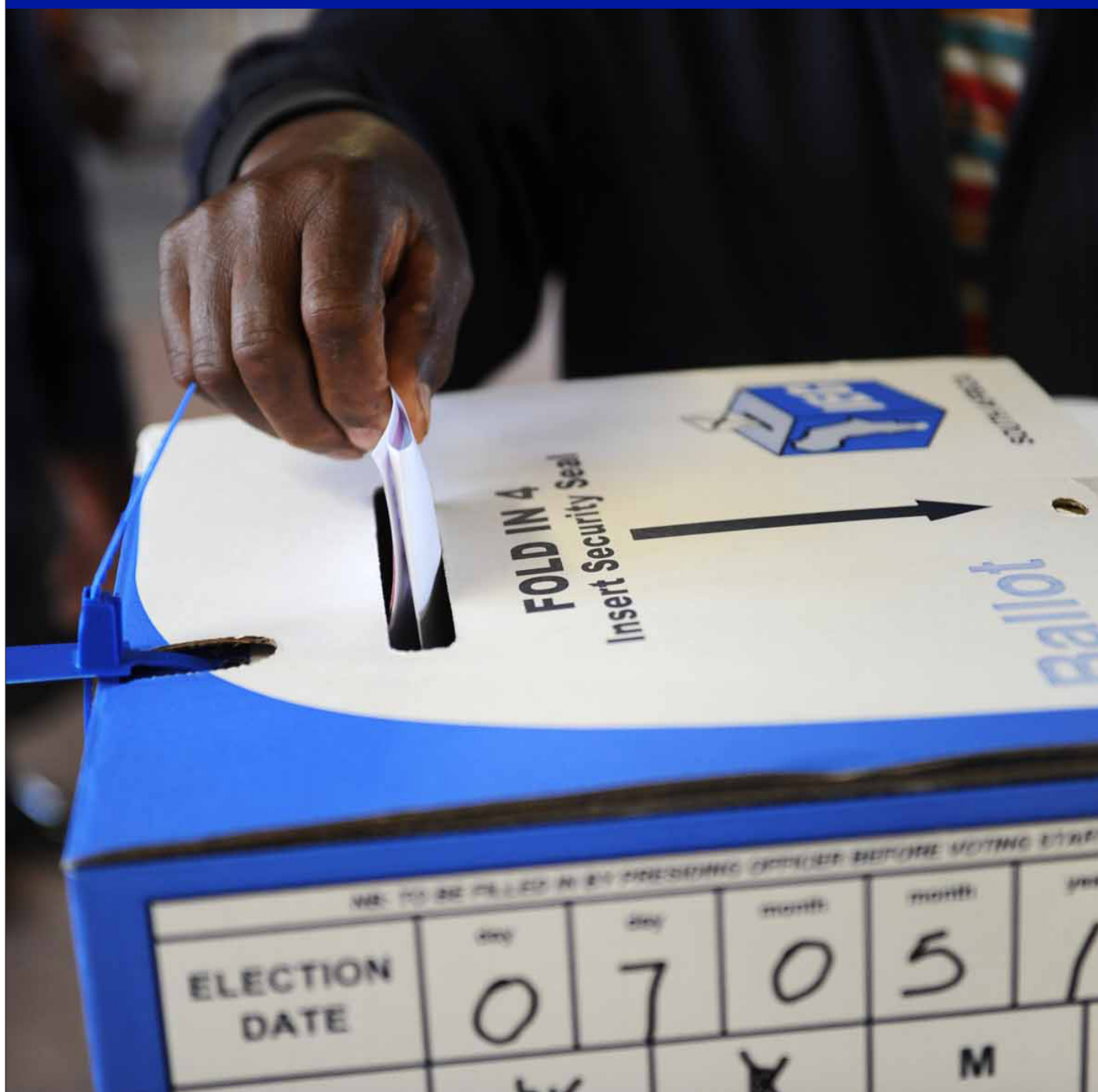


Analysing voter abstention in the 2021 local government elections: A view from five metropolitan municipalities

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Summary of key findings

- While voter abstention has been increasing, the findings of this report show it is a fluid phenomenon. There is only a small core of ‘hardened abstainers’ – only 14% of those who were eligible to vote in all three of the last elections abstained. As a result, most abstainers can be described as partial abstainers.
- On the question of the identity of non-voters, they are more likely to be young and students. They are also more likely to be Black African, Indian or Coloured than White. Income has a curvilinear relationship to abstention with non-voting higher at both the lowest and highest income groups.
- The majority of reasons for not voting related to a range of individual and administrative barriers. Of the individual barriers not being in your registered ward on Election Day was the most common, followed by being at work. The most common administrative barrier was not being registered to vote and this reason was particularly prominent among young people and students.
- Performance evaluations – that is reasons related to disappointments about service delivery – were the third most common explanation for not voting and more frequently discussed by poorer, unemployed and Black African citizens.
- Reasons related being uninterested and disillusioned were more frequently cited by men, amongst those with matric or higher education and among higher income earners.
- A lack of political alignment was mentioned in a small number of explanations overall but did more prominently feature in the explanations of higher income earners.

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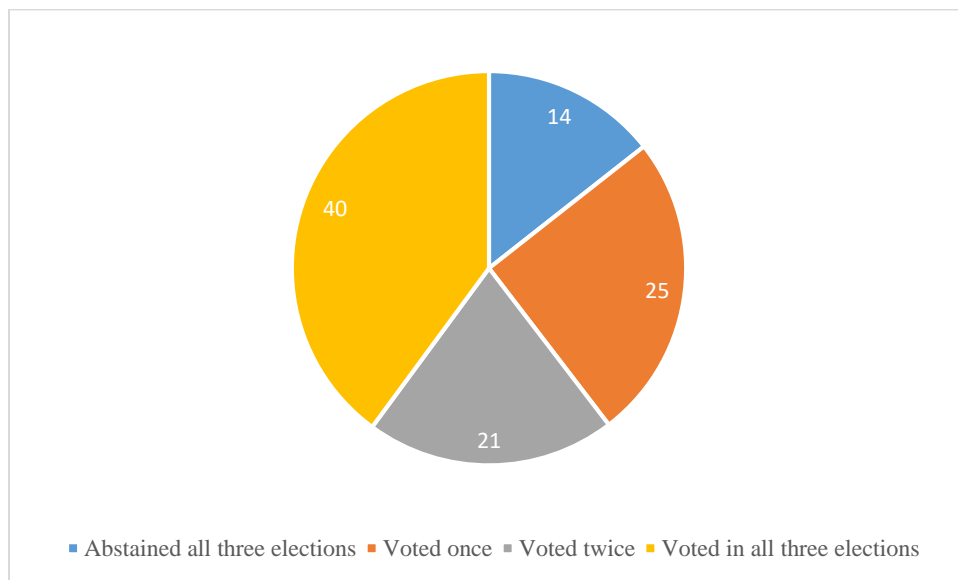
Introduction

The 2021 local government elections (LGE) witnessed the lowest turnout in democratic elections in South Africa, with a turnout of just under half of registered voters.¹ This reflects a longer trajectory of declining voter turnout, which has been in evidence since at least 2009.² As Collette Schulz-Herzenberg argues, voter turnout is a ‘crucial barometer of the vitality and health of a democracy’³ yet the reasons for voter abstention in South Africa are comparatively under-researched. Existing analysis has generally drawn from social attitudes surveys conducted prior to or some time after the election in question.⁴ While such scholarship is valuable, it still leaves a gap in understanding what, precisely, is motivating voter abstention.

This report seeks to address this gap through presenting an analysis of the profile of non-voters and their motivations for not voting. The analysis is based upon a telephone survey conducted within five metropolitan municipalities: eThekweni, the City of Cape Town, the City of Johannesburg, the City of Tshwane, and Nelson Mandela Bay. The survey was conducted between 2 November 2021 (the day after the LGE) and 16 November 2021. A full discussion of the methodology can be found in the methodological brief that accompanies this report. This report presents a preliminary insight into the reasons for abstaining in the 2021 LGE.

Voter fluidity – trends in voting and voter abstention

Figure 1. Voting history of those aged 26 and over in the last three elections (%)

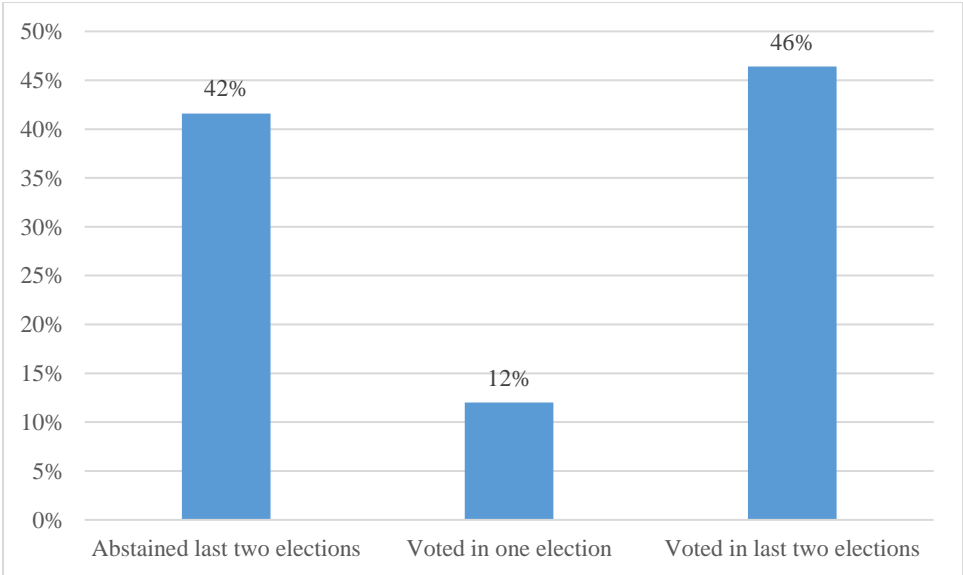


Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

The survey asked participants within the five metropolitan municipalities under study about their participation in the 2021 LGE, the 2019 national and provincial election (NPE) and the 2016 LGE. Figure 1 presents an analysis of the voting history of those aged 26 and over (i.e. those that were eligible to have participated in all three of the last elections). Among this sub sample, only 14% had not participated in any of the last three elections – a category to whom we refer as ‘hardened abstainers’ (see figure 1). While 40% of the sample had participated in all three elections – what we will refer to as ‘consistent voters’. 46% were ‘partial abstainers’ – those who had abstained at least once in the last three elections. 20% participated twice in the last three elections and 26% participated only once. What this suggests is that there is a small core of hardened non-voters who opt not to participate in elections, and significantly, that there is a large cohort acting with what we might call ‘fluidity’ – choosing periodically to vote nor not.

This fluidity is also illustrated in figure 2, which analyses the voting history of those who abstained from the 2021 LGE within the five metropolitan municipalities. As above, this analysis excludes the voting history of those aged 25 and younger, as this cohort would not have been eligible to participate in all three of the last elections. What this demonstrates is more than half (58%) of those who abstained from the 2021 LGE within the five municipalities had voted at least once in the last two elections. While 42% of those who had abstained in the previous two elections decided to abstain again. This analysis highlights that while voter abstention is a growing phenomenon that there is a great deal of fluidity between abstaining and choosing to vote.

Figure 2: Voting history of those aged 26 and above who abstained in the 2021 LGE (%)



Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

The profile of abstainers from the 2021 LGE

Table 1: Profile of those who abstained from the 2021 LGE by selected demographic characteristics

		Abstained 2021 LGE
Age	18 - 34	46%
	35 - 49	33%
	50 - 64	24%
	65+	22%
Race	Black African	37%
	Coloured	38%
	Indian or Asian	41%
	White	19%
Gender	Male	37%
	Female	34%
Employment	Employed	36%
	Unemployed	34%
	Student	59%
	Other labour market inactive	21%
Education	Less than matric	31%
	Completed matric	37%
	Higher Education	35%
Accommodation type	Township or RDP house	36%
	Backyard room	37%
	Informal settlement	33%
	Suburban house	31%
	Flat, apartment or townhouse	35%
	Other	32%
Income	Less than R1,000 per month	36%
	Between R2,501 and R5,000 per month	37%
	Between R5,001 and R10,000 per month	41%
	Between R10,001 and R20,000 per month	34%
	Between R20,001 and R40,000 per month	35%
	More than R40,000 per month	30%

Table 1 provides an analysis of those who did not vote in the 2021 LGE by key socio-demographic variables. As anticipated, those aged between 18 and 34 years had a higher proportion of abstention than those in older age cohorts, 46% of 18-34 year-olds abstained compared to 33% of those aged 35-49, 24% for those aged 50-64 and 22% of those aged above 65.

Considering race, proportionally, voter abstention is higher amongst Black African, Coloured and Indian or Asian adults than for White adults. Only 19% of White adults in the municipalities sampled did not vote in the 2021 LGE, compared to 41% of Indian or Asian adults, 38% of Coloured adults and 37% of Black African adults. There are few gendered differences in the profile of non-voters within the five municipalities, 37% of men abstained compared to 34% of women.

Voter abstention rates were broadly comparable among the employed and unemployed, 36% and 34% of whom abstained, respectively. The percentage of students who abstained was considerably higher, 59%. Abstention was much lower amongst pensioners and other economically inactive groups at 21%.

Regarding levels of education, there were some minor differences in the profile of non-voters. The highest level of abstention was amongst those who had completed matric (37%), which was marginally higher than those with less than matric (31%) and those with higher education (35%).

Accommodation type appears to have a marginal impact on abstention. Those living in suburban houses had the lowest rate of abstention (31%) but this was only two percentage points less than those living in informal settlements (33%). Abstention was highest amongst those living in backyard rooms (37%) followed by township or RDP houses (36%).

When rates of abstention are analysed by income a curvilinear pattern appears, with the highest rates of abstention amongst those earning between R5,001 and R10,000 per month (41%) with abstention lower in the lowest income groups, 36% for those earning less than R1,000 per month, and lower still amongst the highest income earners, 30% for those earning more than R40,000 per month.

The profile of hardened abstainers

As discussed above, only a small proportion (14%) of the sample could be described as ‘hardened abstainers’, that is, those who did not participate in any of the last three elections and were eligible to do so (i.e. only among those aged 26 and above). Table 2 presents an analysis of those in the sample who abstained from all three of the last elections (hardened abstainers), those who abstained in at least one or more of the last three elections (partial abstainers) and those who participated in all three of the last elections (consistent

Table 2: Profile of the voting history of those aged 26 and above by selected demographic characteristics

		Abstained all three elections	Partially abstained in the last three elections	Voted in all three elections
Age	26 - 34	20%	49%	31%
	35 - 49	13%	46%	41%
	50 - 64	10%	41%	48%
	65+	10%	44%	46%
Race	Black African	14%	44%	42%
	Coloured	16%	49%	35%
	Indian or Asian	24%	52%	24%
	White	9%	47%	44%
Gender	Male	16%	45%	39%
	Female	14%	46%	40%
Employment	Employed	15%	46%	39%
	Unemployed	13%	46%	41%
	Student	16%	47%	37%
	Other labour market inactive	8%	45%	47%
Education	Less than matric	11%	43%	46%
	Completed matric	16%	44%	40%
	Higher Education	14%	50%	36%
Accommodation type	Township or RDP house	13%	45%	42%
	Backyard room	14%	41%	46%
	Informal settlement	14%	42%	45%
	Suburban house	15%	49%	37%
	Flat, apartment or townhouse	15%	48%	37%
	Other	11%	45%	44%
Income	Less than R1,000 per month	13%	43%	44%
	Between R1,001 and R2,500 per month	9%	44%	48%
	Between R2,501 and R5,000 per month	9%	44%	48%
	Between R5,001 and R10,000 per month	13%	46%	42%
	Between R10,001 and R20,000 per month	15%	42%	44%
	Between R20,001 and R40,000 per month	12%	48%	41%
	More than R40,000 per month	14%	36%	50%

voters). This analysis demonstrates that the socio-demographical profile of the hardened abstainers is comparable to those who abstained in the 2021 LGE.

A higher proportion of hardened abstainers in the sample were younger. 20% of those aged 26-34 had abstained from the last three elections compared to 13% of 35-49 year olds, 11% of 50-64 year olds and 10% of those aged 65 and above. Furthermore, a higher proportion of those aged 26-34 years and those aged 35-49 years had partially abstained from the last three elections than for older age cohorts, 49% and 46% respectively. While the proportion of those who had consistently participated in the last three elections was higher within the older age cohorts 48% of those aged 50-64 years old reported consistent electoral participation, matched by 46% of those aged 65 and above.

There are some notable differences in the patterning of voter participation between respondents from different races (see table 2). Hardened or partial abstention was highest amongst Indian or Asian adults surveyed, 24% reported abstaining from all three of the last elections while slightly more than half (52%) reported partial abstention in one or more of the last three elections. As a result Indian or Asian adults within the five municipalities in question had the lowest proportion of consistent electoral participation, with only 25% of those surveyed indicating they had participated in all three of the last elections. White adults had the highest levels of consistent electoral participation, 44% had participated in all three of the last elections, 47% had partially abstained from voting and only 9% had abstained from the last three elections. Among Coloured adults surveyed, the rate of partial abstention was higher than the rate of consistent electoral participation, 49% of Coloured adults surveyed reported partial abstention in the last three elections compared to 35% of those who had consistently participated. While the proportion of Black African adults who reported partial abstention was similar to those that reported consistent participation, 44% of Black African adults that were surveyed indicated they had abstained from one or more of the last three elections compared to 42% of those who had consistently participated. As was the case above, electoral participation appears to differ little by gender with similar proportions reporting hardened abstention, partial abstention and consistent participation.

Students had the highest rates of reported hardened abstention and partial abstention with 17% of the current students who were eligible to vote in all three of the last elections indicating they had not voted at all, 33% had voted in all three elections and 50% had partially abstained. As the status of being a student generally overlaps with age, this finding is to be expected. As above, the rates of electoral participation between the employed and unemployed were broadly the same. The lowest proportion of hardened abstainers were found in those who were not economically active, most of whom are pensioners and are more likely to be consistent voters.

Those with higher education had the highest rate of partial abstention, half of those with a higher education reported partial non-participation in the last three elections. This partial non-participation most likely intersect with their life course as students, who have the highest levels of non-participation. The highest levels of electoral participation were found amongst those with less than a matric, 46% were self-reported consistent voters, compared to 40% of those with matric and 36% of those surveyed with higher education. The education of the hardened abstainers was broadly similar, 16% of those surveyed with matric reported not participating in the last three elections compared to 14% of those with higher education and 12% of those with less than matric.

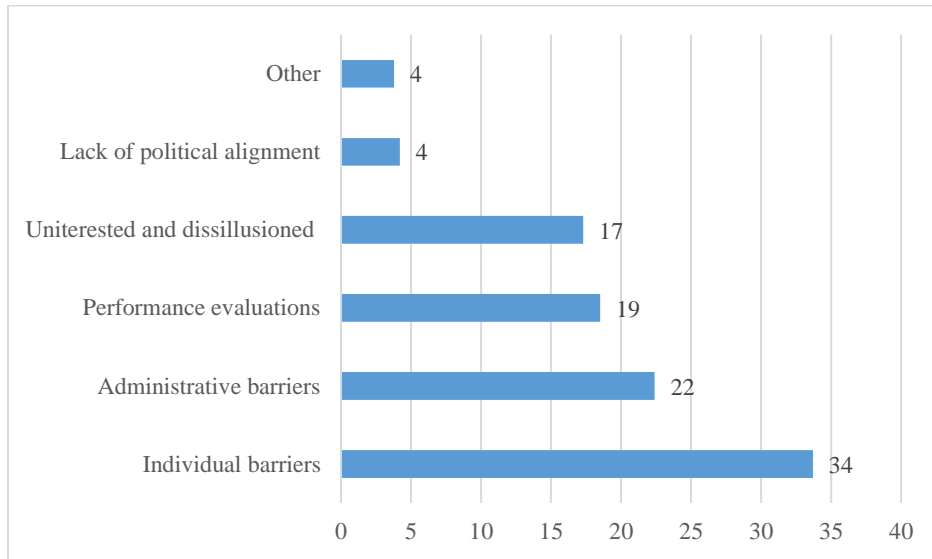
While a curvilinear pattern could be observed in the income levels of those who abstained in the 2021 LGE as table 2 demonstrates, no such clear pattern could be determined amongst the hardened abstainers. The proportion of the self-reported hard abstainers is broadly consistent across all income groups. Lastly, trends in electoral participation differed little by accommodation type.

This analysis illustrates that voter abstention is a fluid phenomenon with most people moving between choosing to vote and not vote. However, there is a small core of hardened abstainers. The hardened abstainers are more likely to be young and are more likely to be Black (Black African, Indian or Asian or Coloured). Other socio-demographic variables appear not to make significant differences making it difficult to demographically profile who the hardened abstainers are. This suggests that voter abstention is driven less by demographic profile but by subjective political assessments. Therefore, in order to examine the phenomenon of non-voting in greater detail, it is important to analyse the explanations for not voting, as provided by our sample.

Explanations for not voting in the 2021 LGE

Participants in the survey explained in their own words why they chose not to vote in the 2021 LGE. These reasons were then coded thematically using the codebook provided in appendix 1. The codebook was developed from similar analysis provided by the Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC) Voter Participation surveys, which also enables us to compare our findings to theirs.⁵ 32 codes were developed in total and these were collapsed into six categories, as reported in figure 3. About a third of responses were allocated to the category of individual barriers (34%) followed by explanations indicating administrative barriers (22%). Reasons related to what we termed performance evaluations, namely reasons related to complaints about service delivery and corruption, were the third most common explanations (19%). 17% said that they were uninterested or disillusioned with voting. Respondents' comments intimating a lack of political alignment accounted for a minority of explanations (4%).

Figure 3. Explanations for not voting in the 2021 LGE (%)



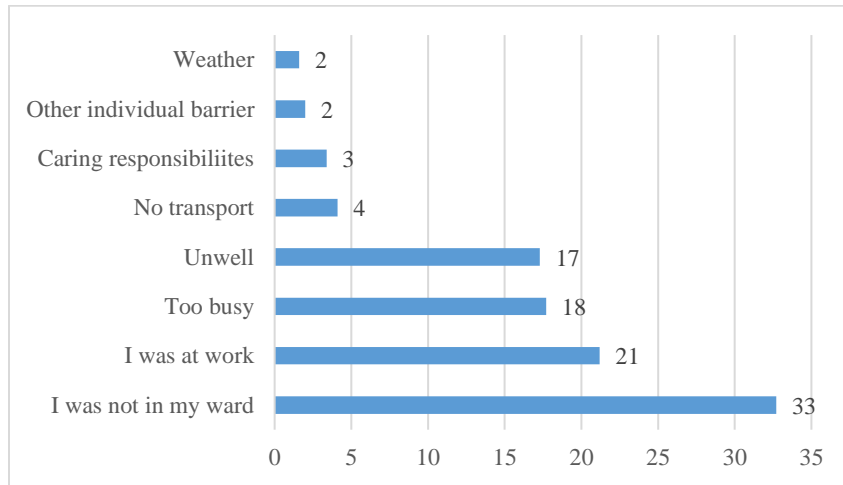
Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

These findings differ substantially from those reported by the HSRC in past years. In their surveys they pose a hypothetical situation to respondents about their voting intentions ‘if there was an election tomorrow’. They find, disinterest and disillusionment, similar to what we have termed uninterested and disillusioned, are the predominant reasons for not voting.⁶ In contrast, we find that a combination of individual and administrative barriers were the primary explanations given by non-voters for not participating in the 2021 LGE. These differences can largely be explained by the difference between providing one’s view on a hypothetical election versus detailing what you actually did. In addition, we must also recognise the influence of social desirability in shaping some of the answers provided. The following sections unpack the explanations provided for not voting in more detail.

Individual barriers

Of those who cited an individual barrier to their participation in the 2021 LGE, 33% stated that they were not in their registered ward on Election Day. A further 21% said they were at work and 18% said they were too busy to vote. An additional 17% cited ill health as the reason that they did not go to vote. Not having transport to the voting station accounted for 4% of individual barriers and a further 3% indicated that caring responsibilities had prevented them from voting.

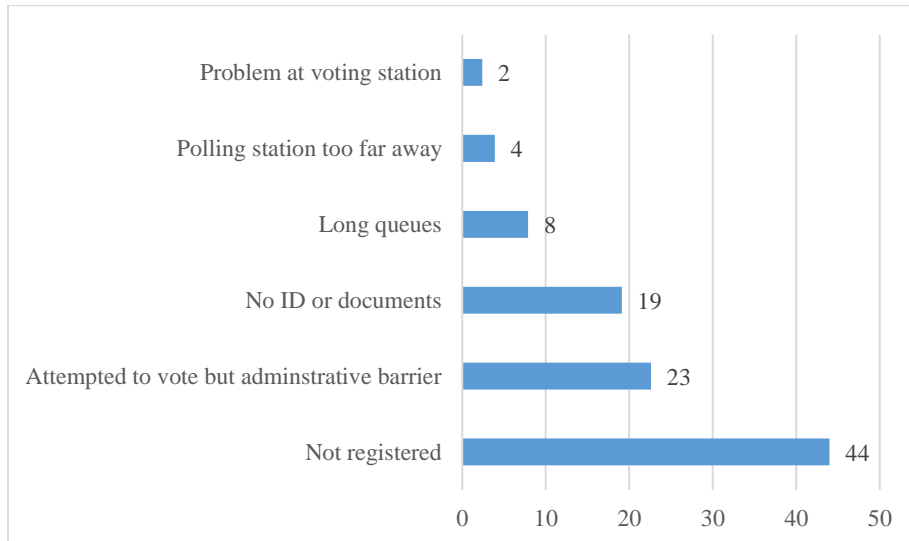
Figure 4: Explanations for not voting in the 2021 LGE related to individual barriers (%)



Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

Administrative barriers

Figure 5: Explanations for not voting in the 2021 LGE related to administrative barriers (%)



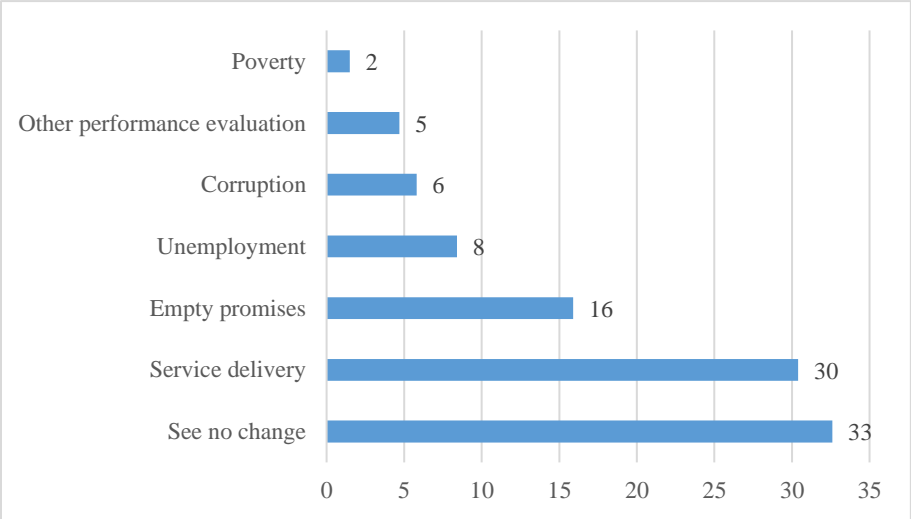
Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

The most common administrative barrier was not being registered to vote, which accounted for 44% of those who cited an administrative reason for not voting. 23% of those who cited an administrative barrier had, by their accounts, actually attempted to vote on Election Day, but had either found that they were not on the voter's role or did not know they could only vote in the ward they were registered in. An additional 2% cited a problem at the voting station as preventing them from voting, which again indicates an attempt

to vote. This means that a quarter of those who faced an administrative barrier to voting had, in fact, attempted to vote. A further 19% of those who had an administrative barrier did not have an ID on Election Day. A minority, 8%, cited long queues as a barrier to voting and a final 4% indicated that their polling station was too far away.

Performance evaluations

Figure 6: Explanations for not voting in the 2021 LGE related to performance evaluations (%)



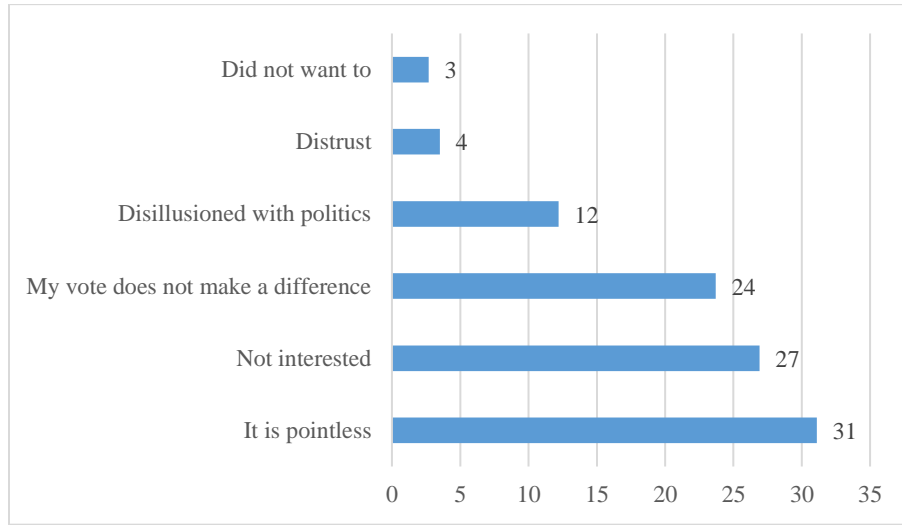
Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

Figure 6 provides a breakdown of the most common reasons for not voting that we termed as related to ‘performance evaluations’ of either national or local government. A third of explanations (33%) within this category were driven by concerns around lack of changes to people’s own personal circumstances or within their community. Another 30% of performance evaluations cited concerns about poor service delivery as supporting their explanation for not voting. A further 16% of performance evaluation explanations were related to disappointment around empty promises. Specific concerns around unemployment and corruption were also raised in performance evaluations.

Uninterested and disillusioned

Of those who expressed that they were uninterested and/or disillusioned as their explanation for not voting, 31% reported that they thought voting was ‘pointless’ and 27% said that they were simply ‘not interested’. Another 24% indicated that they believed that their vote does not make a difference. 12% stated that they were disillusioned with politics, and 4% explained they distrusted the politicians. A final 3% stated that they simply did not want to vote.

Figure 7. Explanations for not voting in the 2021 LGE related to being uninterested and disillusioned (%)

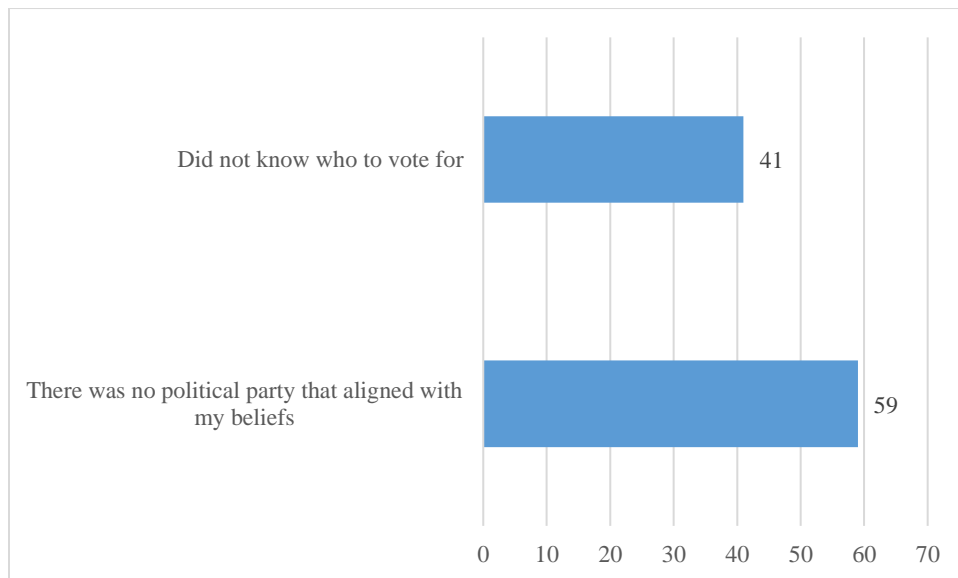


Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

Political alignment

Explanations related to political alignment were grouped into two themes. Here, 59% indicated that they could not find a political party aligned to their beliefs, while 41% indicated that they did not know who to vote for.

Figure 8: Explanations for not voting in the 2021 LGE related to political alignment (%)



Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

Explanations for voter abstention in the 2021 LGE by socio-demographic variables

Table 3 analyses the reasons given for not participating in the 2021 LGE by a range of socio-demographic variables. It demonstrates that older people, specifically those aged 65 or older, were markedly more likely to cite an individual barrier as their reason for not voting in the 2021 LGE: 51% of the explanations given by this age group, as compared to 33% of the explanations given for the youngest age group. Those aged 65 and above also faced fewer administrative barriers to voting than younger age groups, only 9% of those aged 65 and over provided this explanation compared to 25% of those aged 18-34. As younger people are less likely to be registered to vote, this finding is to be expected. The proportion of explanations related to being uninterested and disillusioned were broadly comparable across all age groups. Those aged between 35 and 49 and 50 and 64 years were more likely to cite performance evaluations as driving their decision not to vote in comparison to older age groups.

When analysing the explanations for not voting by race, the table illustrates that explanations related to individual barriers were broadly comparable. White non-voters were more likely to cite an administrative barrier as their reason for not voting, 35% of explanations compared to only 21% of the explanations provided by Black African adults surveyed. Being uninterested and disillusioned was higher amongst Black African and Indian adults surveyed, accounting for 18% and 21% of explanations respectively, compared to only 11% of explanations of White non-voters. Performance evaluations figured more strongly in the reasons for not voting by Black African adults surveyed, accounting for 21% of their explanations compared to 15% for Coloured non-voters, 9% of Indian non-voters and 6% of White non-voters.

While, as we saw in the previous sections, gender did not play a strong role in the socio-demographic profile of non-voters, analysis of the reasons for not voting reveals some gendered differences. For instance, women were more likely than men to cite an administrative barrier as their reason for not voting; 25% of the explanations provided by women compared to 20% of those provided by men. Men were more likely to cite reasons related to being uninterested and disillusioned for voter abstention compared to women, 21% of their explanations, compared to 14% of women's explanations.

Employment status appears to play a role in shaping explanations for not voting. Students, the group most likely to abstain from elections, largely cited individual and administrative reasons for not voting, largely not being registered or not being in their registered ward on Election Day, accounting for just over two thirds (64%) of the reasons they provided for not voting. The employed were more likely than the unemployed to say an individual barrier, most likely being at work, had prevented them from voting, 36% of the employed compared to 26% of the unemployed. Reasons related to being uninterested and disillusioned figured slightly more in the explanations of both the employed and unemployed compared to other groups. 17% of the unemployed and 18% of the employed compared to 15% of students and 12% of

Table 3. Explanations for not voting in the 2021 LGE by selected socio-demographic characteristics

		Individual barriers	Administrative barriers	Uninterested and disillusioned	Performance evaluations	Lack of political alignment
Age	18 - 34	33%	25%	17%	15%	5%
	35 - 49	32%	24%	18%	21%	3%
	50 - 64	34%	16%	16%	25%	3%
	65+	51%	9%	16%	15%	4%
Race	Black African	33%	21%	18%	21%	4%
	Coloured	36%	23%	14%	15%	4%
	Indian or Asian	35%	28%	21%	9%	6%
	White	35%	35%	11%	6%	8%
Gender	Male	33%	20%	21%	19%	5%
	Female	34%	25%	14%	18%	4%
Employment	Employed	36%	21%	18%	15%	6%
	Unemployed	26%	26%	17%	26%	1%
	Student	33%	31%	15%	7%	5%
	Other labour market inactive	48%	14%	12%	18%	4%
Education	Less than matric	38%	26%	9%	22%	1%
	Completed matric	34%	23%	17%	18%	4%
	Higher Education	32%	20%	23%	16%	6%
Accommodation type	Township or RDP house	33%	20%	18%	21%	3%
	Backyard room	35%	25%	11%	27%	1%
	Informal settlement	32%	24%	12%	30%	2%
	Suburban house	38%	19%	20%	11%	7%
	Flat, apartment or townhouse	32%	27%	19%	12%	4%
	Other	36%	21%	17%	27%	3%
Income	Less than R1,000 per month	25%	34%	16%	19%	2%
	Between R1,001 and R2,500 per month	41%	14%	10%	29%	3%
	Between R2,501 and R5,000 per month	46%	15%	15%	20%	1%
	Between R5,001 and R10,000 per month	38%	25%	13%	14%	6%
	Between R10,001 and R20,000 per month	35%	20%	21%	14%	6%
	Between R20,001 and R40,000 per month	27%	25%	25%	12%	11%
	More than R40,000 per month	24%	19%	32%	4%	14%

those who are labour market inactive. Reasons related to performance evaluations featured in just over a quarter (26%) of responses provided by unemployed non-voters. Among those who are labour market inactive, most of whom were pensioners, reported the highest levels of individual barriers that prevented voting, this largely related to ill health or difficulties in getting to the voting station.

Levels of educational attainment reveals appreciable differences in the reasons given for not voting. Those with less than matric were somewhat more likely to provide reasons related to individual and administrative barriers to voting than those with a matric or higher education. Reasons related to being uninterested and disillusioned seemed to increase with higher levels of education. 23% of those with higher education provided this reason more than double the percentage of those with less than matric (9%).

As we may expect, performance evaluations featured more prominently in the explanations provided by those living in informal settlements (30%), backyard rooms (27%) and township and RDP houses (21%) compared to only 11% of the explanations provided by those living in suburban houses and 12% of those living in flats, apartments or townhouses. However, interestingly, being uninterested and disillusioned featured less prominently as explanations by those living in informal settlements (12%) or backyard rooms (11%) compared to those living in township or RDP houses (18%), suburban houses (20%) or flats, apartments or townhouses (19%).

Analysing reasons for not voting by income reveals some interesting patterns. As table 3 shows, being uninterested and disillusioned seems largely to increase as income increases. 32% of those earning more than R40,000 a month reported being uninterested and disillusioned, about double the rates of those earning under R10,000 a month. Similarly, lack of political alignment is more frequently mentioned by high income earners compared to low income earners. Conversely, performance evaluations are more frequently cited by lower income earners compared to high income earners. Only 4% of those earning R40,000 a month or more mentioned performance evaluations in comparison to 19% of those earning R1,000 a month or less.

Explanations for not voting by municipality

Table 4 provides an analysis of the reasons for not voting by municipality, which demonstrates that the local context may play a role in shaping the reasons for not voting. The proportion of people reporting an administrative barrier to voting is relatively consistent across all five municipalities. However, there are greater variations in individual barriers. 40% of those living in Nelson Mandela Bay reported an individual barrier compared to only 40% of those living in eThekweni. While being uninterested and disillusioned was more frequently cited by those living in eThekweni (23%) than those living in Nelson Mandela Bay (12%). It is possible that the social unrest of July 2021, which followed the imprisonment of former President Jacob

Zuma, may have played a role here. Performance evaluations featured more prominently in the explanations of those living in the City of Johannesburg and the City of Tshwane, 22% and 21% respectively, than those living in the City of Cape Town (15%) and Nelson Mandela Bay (15%).

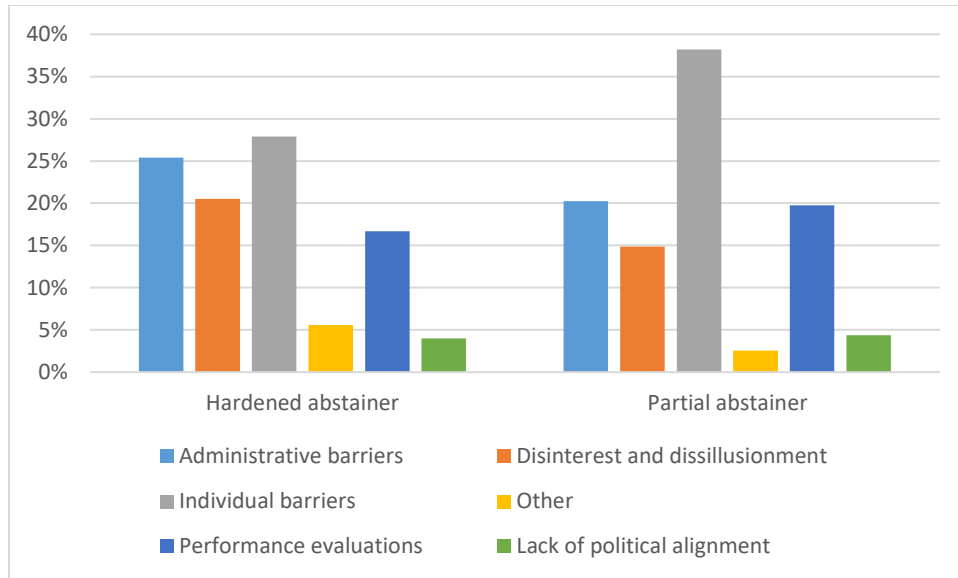
Table 4. Explanations for not voting in the 2021 LGE by municipality

	Individual barriers	Administrative barriers	Uninterested and disillusioned	Performance evaluations	Lack of political alignment
City of Cape Town	36%	22%	17%	15%	4%
City of Johannesburg	34%	22%	16%	22%	3%
City of Tshwane	34%	23%	15%	21%	5%
Nelson Mandela Bay	40%	23%	12%	15%	5%
eThekweni	30%	23%	23%	17%	4%

Explanations for not voting by voting history

Figure 9 reports the explanations given for not voting in the 2021 LGE between hardened abstainers and partial abstainers. The figure illustrates how, for those fitting the profile of ‘partial abstainers’, individual barriers were the most significant reason for not participating in the 2021 LGE, accounting for 38% of their explanations. On the other hand, among hardened abstainers, a combination of individual and administrative barriers were the most common explanations closely. This was followed by being reportedly uninterested and disillusioned, which was higher amongst the hardened abstainers than amongst the partial abstainers: 21% compared to 15%. Performance evaluations featured slightly more in the explanations of partial abstainers than hardened abstainers, 20% compared to 17%. What this suggests is that partial abstention in the 2021 LGE may be more associated with a combination of personal circumstances, such as not being in your registered ward on Election Day, as well as their negative assessments of government performance, which influenced them not to vote. While hardened abstainers report a combination of individual and administrative barriers, including not registering to vote, in conjunction with higher levels of disinterest and disillusionment.

Figure 9. Reasons for abstention in the 2021 LGE by hardened and partial abstainers (%)



Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

Conclusion

Rising voter abstention is a barometer of the health of post-apartheid democracy, providing insight into the depth of support for the democratic project. While it has been well-established that voter abstention is growing, it has been less clear as to *who* is abstaining, and more importantly, *why* they are abstaining. Most of the available research has tended towards the use of social attitudes surveys, conducted prior to or some time after the election in question.⁷ The analysis presented in this report provides a rare insight into what non-voters said in the period immediately after the 2021 LGE.

This analysis revealed that voter abstention is a fluid phenomenon. While only 14% of those within the five municipalities could be described as ‘hardened abstainers’ – i.e. they had not participated in any of the least three elections – a much larger group, 46% of the sample, are ostensibly better-described as ‘partial abstainers’ who had abstained from at least one of the last three elections. Indeed, 46% of those who had abstained in the 2021 LGE had voted in the previous two elections. This underscores that while voter abstention may be a growing phenomenon, it is also a complex, fractured one: in a word, fluid.

On the question of the identity of non-voters, as we would expect, they are more likely to be young and students. They are more likely to be Black African, Indian or Coloured than White. Compared to previous research⁸, we documented little variation by levels of educational attainment amongst non-voters.

The majority of reasons for not voting related to a range of individual and administrative barriers. Of the individual barriers not being in your registered ward on Election Day was the most common, followed by

being at work. The most common administrative barrier was not being registered to vote and as we would expect this was a common reason among young people and students.

Performance evaluations, which were most commonly related to service delivery issues, were the third most common reason for not voting. These reasons were more commonly discussed by poorer, unemployed and Black African citizens. Reasons related being uninterested and disillusioned were more frequently cited by men, amongst those with matric or higher and amongst the wealthier sections of society. A lack of political alignment was mentioned in a small number of explanations overall but did figure more prominently feature in the explanations of the wealthy.

Abstention in the 2021 LGE was largely driven by a combination of individual and administrative barriers. Not registering to vote or being ‘too busy’ to vote are among the common reasons provided for not voting. Not registering to vote is a pre-emptive disengagement from electoral democracy. While being ‘too busy’ suggests that participating in electoral democracy is not strongly valued by some. While these reasons reflect administrative and individual barriers they are also deeply suggestive of a different kind of disinterest and disengagement from electoral democracy.

In other research on voter abstention, performance evaluations of local and/or national government have not featured prominently. The fact that performance evaluations were surfaced as the third most common reason for not voting suggests, as Adam Harris has argued, that the South African electorate is becoming less tied to race and identity based voting but are making a wider assessment of the political incumbents.⁹ This seems to bear out in our analysis of voter abstention.

Encouragingly, our findings seem to suggest that voter abstention is a fluid phenomenon. Abstaining in one election does not necessarily mean disengagement with the electoral process forever. This, perhaps, puts the onus on political parties to speak to the demographics that disengaged from the 2021 LGE and speak to their concerns. The report also surfaces the importance of getting people registered to vote, especially for younger people and there is perhaps some urgency to consider policy proposals that have been made in this regard.¹⁰

Appendix 1

Full codebook used for thematic coding for voting abstention reasons

Administrative barriers
Not registered
No ID or documents
Polling station too far away
Long queues
Problem at voting station
Attempted to vote but administrative barrier
Uninterested and disillusioned
Not interested
My vote does not make a difference
Disillusioned with politics
Distrust
It is pointless
Did not want to
Individual barriers
I was not in my ward
I was at work
No transport
Unwell
Caring responsibilities
Too busy
Weather
Other individual barrier
Performance evaluations
Corruption
Empty promises
Service delivery
Unemployment
See no change
Poverty
Other performance evaluation
Not eligible
Lack of political alignment
Did not know who to vote for
There was no political party that aligned with my beliefs
Other
Refuse

¹ Van der Walt, S. 2021. CSIR predicts 48% voter turnout for 2021 Local Government Elections. SBAC Digital News. 1 November. Available at <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/csir-predicts-48-voter-turnout-for-2021-local-government-elections/>

² Schulz-Herzenberg, C. 2020. The South African non-voter: An analysis. Available at <https://www.kas.de/documents/261596/10543300/The+South+African+non-voter+-+An+analysis.pdf/acc19fbd-bd6d-9190-f026-8d311078b670?version=1.0&t=1608>

³ Schulz-Herzenberg, C. 2021. With ANC and DA both facing credibility deficits, voter turnout is a key factor in the local elections. *The Daily Maverick*, 28 October, Available at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-10-28-with-anc-and-da-both-facing-credibility-deficits-voter-turnout-is-a-key-factor-in-the-local-elections/>

⁴ See HSRC. 2014. IEC voter participation survey 2013/14: An overview of results. Available at <https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Downloads/Document-Library>; Robert, B., Struwig, J., Gordon, S.L. and Davids, Y.D. 2019. The unconvinced vote: The nature and determinants of voting intentions and the changing character of South African Electoral Politics. *Politikon* 46: 4, 481-498; Schulz-Herzenber, C. 2019. The decline of partisan voting and the rise in electoral uncertainty in South Africa's 2019 general elections. *Politikon* 46(4): 462-480;

⁵ See HSRC. 2014. IEC voter participation survey 2013/14: An overview of results. Available at <https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Downloads/Document-Library>;

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Schulz-Herzenberg and HSRC

⁸ See note 4 above.

⁹ Harris, A.S. 2020. Towards performance-based politics: Swing voters in South Africa's 2016 local elections. *Politikon* 47(2): 196-214.

¹⁰ See note 2 above.