



## Only 20 percent of Eastern Cape's "First Time Voters" registered to vote

Share This Story, Choose Your Platform!



**By Zwanga Mukhuthu**

For the 2019 national and provincial elections, the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) had by this week, registered more than 3.3-million voters in the Eastern Cape (IEC-EC, 2019). This figure constitutes all citizens aged 18 and older as per the electoral Act.

As per the Census 2011, there are close to 4-million eligible voters from a population of 6.5-million in the province.

To date, the number of youth (or the so-called 'first time voters') aged 18 and 19 registered to vote in this year's general elections in the Eastern Cape stands at 63 000 (IEC-EC, January 2019), while the number of elderly residents aged 80 years and older on the same voters roll is approximately 119 000. This is 63 000 out of a provincial youth population of about 309 970 youth (18 and 19 year olds). In essence, only 20% of eligible first-time youth voters in the province are registered to vote in the upcoming general election.

While it was largely reported that the results of the 2016 local government election indicated that South Africa voters were generally more informed about democratic processes and the roles and of political parties in service delivery; even then, youth voter turn-out was worryingly low.

With a quick glance at the statistic above, one can conclude that elderly people in the province (80 years and older) see more value in participating in a democratic process such as an election, than its youth. This begs the question:

***If the province's pensioners understand that one of the pillars of a democracy is citizen participation in government, why is it that this message is not filtering through to its youth?***

A reflection on the manner in which civic and democracy education is being done, particularly that which is meant at building youth agency is needed. This conversation should also reflect on the resourcing of these initiatives and the extent to which they target and reach young people across the province.

This is critical, because a democratically conscious youth that expresses great levels of civic agency is bound to grow into democratically conscious and responsible citizens. This is necessary because successful democracies depend on the effective participation of the citizenry in democratic processes. This is not only the citizens' right but also its duty.

While facilitating voter education is one of the mandates of the IEC which it does facilitate well, there are however great limitations with the IEC education. It only focuses, for example, on ***who is eligible to vote, how to vote, where to vote, where and when to register and what the ballot paper looks like***. There is not civic or democracy education, it is not dealing with the '***why must you vote***' question.



This is the key question young people are grappling with - why vote? What will the vote change and what will it influence? The power of the vote as a policy-influencing and mandate-giving moment is not unpacked in many of the IEC educational campaigns and this is where NGOs like Afesis-corplan and others, whose work is aimed at deepening democracy, must come in.

It is my view that there has never been as pressing a time as now, to link the vote to the socio-economic struggles of young people and to use every vote as a mandate-giving moment. Youth can also, in numbers, use their vote as a recall mechanism if those in power fail to address the pressing needs of this group.

With all the socio-economic challenges confronting it as a group, the youth cannot afford to be bystanders in the country's democratic processes and expect targeted policy to emerge thereafter. They have to play a meaningful part in shaping the country's future and its policies. And voting is only one step in that process.

Elections give legitimate status and power to elected leaders. Once this power has been delegated to those elected, the role of the youth thereafter is to make sure this power is not abused. The youth should never give up their right to hold government accountable and should never delegate such a responsibility to others, i.e. the pensioners.

The low numbers of registered youth voters in the Eastern Cape and elsewhere in the country indicates that there is a need for more deliberate and targeted voter education, one that will particularly target youth voters.

***In response to that question youth ask - why must we vote? - I say:***

You need to vote because every election matters, you as an individual matter, the choices you make matter, in your hand lies power and that power is in your vote and your choice will have a very direct and concrete effect on your daily life.

Voting is a simple and painless process and with the availability of many voting stations, you are guaranteed to spend little time on the queue. Youths wishing to register to vote in the upcoming general elections are still welcome to do so but time is running out fast. Go register to vote, but your actions must not end there; you also need to follow your vote by holding those you voted for accountable to you through various legislated means until the next election.

***For more information on #FollowYourVote2019 click [here](#).***

**Zwanga Mukhuthu** is a programme officer responsible for communications and advocacy at Afesis-corplan, an NGO contributing to community-driven development and good local governance in the Eastern Cape. He is a youth, and writes in his personal capacity.