

TO VOTE  
OR  
NOT TO VOTE



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# Don't vote

**By Ebrahim Fakir and Ivor Sarakinsky**

The primary question facing South African voters in 2019 is not who to vote for, but whether to vote at all.

The 2019 election season has begun in earnest. Parties have been vigorously campaigning, with many a pundit making the obvious but important point that voter turnout will be key to determining the outcome.

Some have even gone as far as recommending a vote for President Cyril Ramaphosa to strengthen his hand in cleaning up the ANC and the government. Others suggest that, despite Ramaphosa's best intentions, a large majority for the ANC will see them squander power, yet again, and that strengthening the opposition may be better for more effective government.

Whatever permutation is opted for is dependent on voter turnout. We think there is

more important reason why turnout and participation matters: voter participation and turnout (or lack thereof) sends a strong signal to the political class. Without being democratic nay-sayers, we suggest withholding the vote has become the weapon of last resort in voters' arsenal against those striving for political office.

Democratic theory suggests there is an axiomatic relationship between high rates of voter participation and turnout and high levels of representation, accountability, oversight and governmental responsiveness.

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Twenty five years of post-apartheid popular national government, in fact, proves otherwise. Ranging from the arms deal to Bosasa, with the Guptas in between, and an economic, education, health and welfare crisis, the political class has shown itself to be unresponsive and blinkered. They have circumvented accountability and transparency while subordinating citizens' interests to that of an encumbered political establishment.

This deafness manifests through the failure to address crime, service delivery, economic growth, employment creation, and socio-economic injustices. In fact, so uncaring has the government become that it appealed court rulings compelling it to replace pit latrines with toilets for school children.

### **1. Appreciative of democracy**

It is trite but no less true to say South Africans remain invested in democratic processes. They are also keenly appreciative of democracy as a set of social practices and as a form of government. Participation in elections is one such indicator.

Since 1994, we have witnessed what are, by

international comparison, high levels (though declining) of voter participation. Since the inaugural 1994 elections attracted an 86% turnout, voter turnout as a proportion of registered voters has remained relatively high, peaking in 1999 at 89%. From then on there was a steady decline, with the 2004 voter turnout dropping to 76%, increasing slightly in 2009 to 77% and declining to 73% in 2014.

Notwithstanding relatively high turnouts, it is clear that as confidence and trust in politicians and public institutions progressively declined, so too has voter participation.

Invested as South Africans are in the democratic process, they continue to participate politically, even though they have turned out less at elections, trying every manner of means to extract accountability and oversight from government — ranging from protests (we have on average 300 a year); engaging in “lawfare”; signing and proposing petitions; attending public participation processes; making policy submissions and going to hearings, through to marching in demonstrations that sometimes turn violent.

Yet the level of governmental responsiveness remains low and atrophied. Even when the judiciary has ruled against public institutions and individual office bearers for negligence, exceeding the bounds of their authority, acting irregularly or dishonestly, no consequences have followed.

In some instances, individuals and institutions continue with their flawed bureaucratic routines without any reform in processes and procedures — a perusal of Constitutional Court judgments and the Auditor-General’s reports over the past 25 years makes for depressing reading but proves the point beyond reasonable doubt. Perversely, individuals have been rewarded with continued public office or allowed to resign while maintaining their lucrative benefits.

In other words, they are rewarded for malfeasance and benefit from impunity. No ordinary citizen would be afforded this luxury.

## **2. Accountability vs turnout**

It is therefore clear that high voter turnouts haven't worked for accountability. High levels of participation have failed to change the course of the government and bureaucratic leviathan. This is not restricted to the ANC. The DA in Cape Town and the Western Cape have repeatedly shown that with both an increasing majority and an increased rate of voter participation, there has been an exponential increase in internal wrangling and power struggles for positions, coupled with a non-responsive posture to citizens' needs. The De Lille saga and the housing crisis, with a discounted price on public land to property developers who might also be DA donors, illustrates the point.

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The EFF remains untested in this regard, but their performance in parliament and in the councils in which they voted minority governments into power, doesn't place them in a much better stead. Their lack of a coherent policy framework, extreme flip-flopping from issue to issue, inchoate and rhetorical demands and mimicry of colonial behaviour, crude racial stereotyping and institutional destabilisation, not to mention internal fragmentation, doesn't bode well either.

Of course, there is the option of voting for other smaller parties, but these demonstrably show a lack of policy distinction, organisational depth, institutionalisation or any connection to a definable constituency (except for niche special interest parties such as the FF+ or the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP)).

Voters in 2019 are therefore faced with Hobson's choice, confronted with the prospect of selecting the least worse, rather than the best, party. This widely articulated view goes

against the ordinary rationality of electoral decision-making. Usually, voters rank parties in descending order from best to worst and vote for the one that best represents their interests. South Africans now seem to be stacking the list in terms of worst to least bad in ascending order. This is an indictment of all political parties which, we have argued elsewhere, are uniformly poor.

This calculus is dangerous for democracy. The winner of an election receives a legitimate mandate from the citizenry to govern and exercise power and authority, despite the motivation of citizens. Voting thus ensures that all political parties are insulated from the varying degrees of contempt that underpins the voter's eventual choice.

### **3. Winning takes all**

All political parties strive for is a majority. They don't care about the reasons behind individual voters' choice. Once they have climbed over the first hurdle of this procedural dimension of democracy it becomes business as usual for them, and voters' and citizens' concerns are secondary. This has been the case in SA for some time.

In such instances, withholding the vote from a craven set of parties that have incepted a governance credibility crisis makes perfect sense. That large numbers of traditional ANC voters stayed away in the 2016 local elections, leading to the loss of metropolitan local governments, has made the Gauteng ANC nervous about the prospect of losing the 2019 provincial election.

This demonstrates that, apart from being a rational response to recidivist government, it is also a highly effective threat to get a better and more considered response from an otherwise moribund political class. A stay-away might be the most effective way to resuscitate accountability and disincentivise impunity.

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## ***complacent politicians***

In instances where none of the democratic voice pressures have extracted accountability, responsiveness and meaningful service delivery, what else can citizens do but withhold the vote?

Withholding the vote on a mass scale remains the most powerful mechanism to shake the slumbering and complacent political class to its core. It is the only means available to citizens to encourage the insular political establishment to respond to it, and accept that citizens are the principals, and public servants and politicians the agents of citizens.

The 2019 election is an opportune moment in which to correct the distortion of this relationship. There is nothing like the threat of a legitimisation crisis to spur political action from otherwise complacent politicians.

In proposing the rationality of a “don’t vote” position, we need to dispense with the canard that not voting dilutes other rights, especially the right to demand governmental performance and responsiveness. All rights are constitutionally guaranteed, separate and exist independently of the franchise and its exercise. Not exercising one right does not negate others. Not voting does not negate or nullify the right to expect high-quality service delivery, accountability or responsiveness from public servants and politicians.

- *Fakir is director of programmes at the Auwal Socio-Economic Research Institute, and Sarakinsky is an associate professor at the Wits School of Governance.*

# Vote

**By Zwanga Mukhuthu**

Ebrahim Fakir and Ivor Sarakinsky (2019) in their 'don't vote' article have argued why we should all consider abstaining from voting in the 8 May 2019 national and provincial elections to shake or teach the current political establishment a lesson. The two co-writers argue, so complacent and uncaring is our elected representatives they have lost touch with reality. The writers say this manifests in a high crime rate, poor service delivery, slow economic growth, unemployment, corruption, and socio-economic injustice. They also proceed to say the Democratic Alliance and the Economic Freedom Fighters do not have what it takes to live up to the aspirations of millions of South Africans looking at what has happened in the Western Cape and the red beret's behaviour in Parliament.

Fakir and Sarakinsky's argument leaves the reader with the impression that simply because the ANC which has been in government for the last 25 years, has failed to address society's problems no other party in South Africa deserves our votes and to a larger extent to govern. The "don't vote" argument does not go further to say exactly what would happen if we all heeded that call. I will try to the best of my ability to pick up where the two writers left off.

There will be a government in South Africa after the May 8 general elections even if we don't vote, because the friends, relatives and supporters of contesting candidates would have casted their ballots. Using Fakir and Sarakinsky's argument, let's say there are 10 registered voters and out of the 10, three vote for the same party, one votes for a different party and a vote of the fifth person is spoiled while the remaining five withhold their vote - we will end up with a situation where the three

are making decisions for the seven until the next elections. This is already happening in South Africa when one looks at voter turnout data. They few are deciding for the many.

For instance voter turnout for the 2014 general election was 73.48% (IEC, 2014) lower than the turnout from the 2009 general election where voter turnout was 77.30% (IEC, 2009). These percentages of counted votes published by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) are figures of registered people who voted for the political parties, and not the total number of eligible South Africans who could have registered to vote but then abstained.

***Voter turnout for the 2014 general election was 73.48% lower than the turnout from the 2009 general election where voter turnout was 77.30%.***

Voter turnout trends in the last 10 years [2004 to - 2014 general elections] already suggest a large number of registered voters will not vote on May 8. For example in the Eastern Cape, there were more than 2.8 million people on the voter's roll in the 2004 provincial and national elections but only 2.3 million people actually turned out to vote on April 14, 2004. In 2009 the number of people on the voter's roll had marginally increased to 3 million but only 2.2 million people voted on April 22, 2009. In 2014 3.2 million people were registered to vote in the Eastern Cape but only 2.2 million of those voted on May 7, 2014. These figures clearly put voter turnout at 81.1% in 2004 and 70.32% in 2014.

A political election provides citizens with the opportunity to vote and decide what happens to the future of their country. And since democracy is "rule by the people", it is the responsibility of every citizen to vote.

'Why vote?' is one of key questions some people, especially the youth, are grappling with. 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-corporplan and others, whose work is aimed at deepening democracy, comes 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 our society and to use every vote as a mandate-giving moment. Citizens can also, in numbers, use their vote as a recall mechanism if those in power fail to address the pressing needs of communities.

With all the socio-economic challenges confronting them, all citizens eligible to vote cannot afford to be bystanders in the country's democratic processes and expect targeted policy that addresses their needs 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 citizens thereafter is to make sure this power is not abused. We should never give up our right to hold government accountable and should never delegate such a responsibility to the few, i.e. political party supporters.

The low numbers of people that are turning out to vote year in and year out indicates that there is a need for more deliberate and targeted voter education, one that will particularly target citizens that are abstaining from voting.

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.”***

High voter turnout sends out a message about

the sort of government citizens need and expect. Our elected representatives must work together and also strive to deliver better healthcare, education, early childhood development, fair taxation, sustainable employment, small business opportunities, better infrastructure and a more affordable public transport system.

The multiparty governments that we have seen following the 2016 local government elections gave South Africans a glimpse of the possibilities that awaits us if elected representatives put their differences aside and work for the people that voted them into power. The in-sourcing of 1600 security officers to the City of Johannesburg municipality bears reference. According to media reports, previously the City outsourced its security through service providers paying an average of R14000 per security guard, while the guards themselves received as little as R4000 as a basic salary. Under the in-sourcing system the guards received the life changing R14000 salary a month with additional benefits such as medical aid, pension fund membership, subsidised education and housing.

In many countries including South Africa, people fought for the right to vote. Today 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. Go 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. This can be in a way of attending ward committee meetings in your area, participating in Integrated Development Planning public participation meetings, submitting petitions to your municipality, making Promotion of Access to Information requests, and organising marches, to name just a few.

If you don't vote, others will make the decisions for you because only the minority would have voted for leaders in government.

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