

Chapter 4

Election Day Exit Poll

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Introduction

The Human Sciences Research Council's involvement with the 1999 general election was extensive. It included:

- (1) the focussing of its regular opinion polls on political attitudes and individuals' voting intentions;
- (2) a survey commissioned by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the Department of Home Affairs to independently determine how widespread the use of bar-coded identity documents was; and
- (3) an independently¹ commissioned study of the election. This study was focussed on the performance of the electoral machinery and made use of a variety of instruments. These instruments included in depth interviews with individuals involved in the election process, focus group interviews with organisations central to the electoral process, and an exit poll among voters.

This section focusses on the last of these activities - the exit poll conducted among voters.

The intention of the exit poll was to ascertain the degree to which voters felt that the poll had been conducted in a manner free and fair to all voters and political parties. Although a "free-and-fair" poll would depend on how the IEC and its representatives conducted themselves throughout the electoral process, the perception of the voters in this regard would be more important. Any perception among a substantive part of the voters that the election process was anything less than free and fair would easily deprive the election of its legitimacy.

Survey Methodology

Research Instrument

The exit poll consisted of a short questionnaire administered to voters selected at regular intervals from a number of voting stations. These voting stations were themselves selected at random.

Unusual for an exit poll, respondents were not asked for whom they voted. A question to this effect could have compromised the responses. The following issues were covered:

- Knowledge of the election process prior to voting
- Neutrality of election institutions and officials
- Time spent waiting to vote
- Distance travelled to voting station
- Clarity on process to be followed inside voting station
- Presence of political party influences
- Knowledge of voting procedure
- Perception of undue pressure or intimidation
- Perception of impartiality of officials
- Voting decision (optional)
- Biographical data relating to the respondent

Sampling

The sample was stratified according to province and to metropolitan, urban and rural location. The number of stations surveyed in each province ranged from 30 in the larger provinces to 18 in the less populated and more homogeneous (in terms of level of urbanisation) provinces. At each station approximately 50 voters were interviewed after they had cast their votes and left the voting booths.

The biographical data reveal that the respondents were broadly representative of South Africa's demographic profile: slightly fewer male than female respondents (49% versus 51%) urban respondents and 40% rural respondents. The geographical, age and educational status details of the respondents are given below.

Table 4.1: Number of surveyed voting stations and respondents, by province

Province	Voting stations	Respondents
Eastern Cape	29	1526
Free State	20	1047
Gauteng	30	1547
KwaZulu-Natal	30	1617
Mpumalanga	18	910
Northern Cape	20	1 001
Northern Province	22	1 159
North West	20	939
Western Cape	25	1 395
TOTAL	214	11 140

Table 4.2: Age distribution of respondents

Age group	Per cent
18-22 yrs	13
23-29 yrs	24
30-44 yrs	34
45-59 yrs	20
60 + yrs	9

Table 4.3: Educational distribution of respondents

Educational status	Per cent
None	10
Primary	16
Standard 6-9	32
Standard 10	25
Post-matric	18

Table 4.4: Times at which the interviews were conducted

Times of interviews	Per cent
07h00-10h30	25
10h31-14h00	32
14h01-17h30	25
17h31-21h00	18

Results of the Poll

Free and Fair

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (96%) were of the opinion that the election was conducted freely and fairly on 2 June 1999. Moreover, this perception emerged among respondents in all nine provinces and of all population groups.

Table 4.5: Freeness and fairness, by province

Province	Per cent
Eastern Cape	96
Free State	99
Gauteng	96
KwaZulu-Natal	97
Mpumalanga	96
Northern Cape	97
Northern Province	98
North West	93
Western Cape	95
Total	96

Table 4.6: Freeness and fairness, by population group

Population group	Per cent
Black	97
White	93
Coloured	95
Indian	94

Among the three per cent of respondents who did not think that the election had been free and fair, the main reasons given were that other citizens had been excluded from voting, that a single party dominated the election and that there had been intimidation of voters and undue influence by officials.

Secrecy of the Vote

The majority of the respondents believed that their vote was secret. Asked whether they believed anyone would know for which party they voted in the election, 85% indicated that they believed that their vote was secret. Twelve per cent did not believe that their vote was secret and three per cent were "uncertain". Reservations about the sanctity of the ballot nevertheless did not deter the latter two groups from voting.

Perceptions of the secrecy of the vote differed by province. The provinces with the highest proportions of respondents who believed that their vote was secret were the Free State (92%), Gauteng and the Western Cape (89%). The provinces with the lowest (though still high) levels of confidence in the secrecy of the vote were the

Northern Cape (72%) and the Northern Province (70%). In KwaZulu-Natal (87%) and the Western Cape (89%), where there were concerns about the potential for violence, the majority of the respondents believed in the secrecy of their votes.

Table 4.7: Secrecy of the vote, by province

Province	Yes
Eastern Cape	77%
Free State	92%
Gauteng	89%
KwaZulu-Natal	87%
Mpumalanga	80%
Northern Cape	72%
Northern Province	70%
North West	88%
Western Cape	89%

Ease of Understanding the Voting Procedures

The vast majority of the respondents (96%) reported that the voting procedures were easy to understand. In every province more than 90% of the respondents classified the process as "easy to understand". Although there was a tendency for better educated respondents to be more at ease with the procedures, (93%) of the least educated (those respondents who classified themselves as having no formal education) nevertheless classified the procedures as "easy to understand". There were no noticeable differences in understanding the procedures by gender or population group, indicating that comprehension of the procedures was fairly uniform, both socially and geographically.

Force and Intimidation

The survey also explored whether voters felt that they could exercise their voting choice free of any duress. The overwhelming majority of the respondents nationally (99%) confirmed that they had not been "forced" to support a particular political party, and more than 97% of the respondents in all the provinces indicated the same. There was no meaningful distinction between the respondents by population group or gender. In excess of 98% of the male and female respondents of all the population groups considered their voting choice to be free of any intimidation.

Table 4.8: Percentage not intimidated by province

Province	Per cent
Eastern Cape	100
Free State	99
Gauteng	100
KwaZulu-Natal	98
Mpumalanga	98
Northern Cape	98
Northern Province	99
North West	98
Western Cape	98

Among the 1,2% of respondents who reported being forced or intimidated to vote for a party, most reported that this occurred prior to going to vote. Only 0,3% of the respondents said that they were subjected to such influence while waiting to vote. Most respondents who reported being "forced" to vote for a particular party identified "family and friends" as the antagonists (59%). Another one-quarter indicated party workers as the antagonists. The levels of undue influence seems to have been higher in rural than in urban areas.

Problems Experienced

More than two-thirds (68%) of the respondents indicated that they did not discern any problem with the 1999 election. Among the identified problems, the most frequently mentioned were long queues (6%), the need to register (5%), delays at the Department of Home Affairs (3%), perceived inefficiencies during the registration process (2%), and the omission of names from the voters' roll (2%).

Six out of every ten respondents who complained about the omission of their names from the voters' roll came from the Eastern Cape.

Table 4.9: Problems experienced, by province

Province	Long queues	Need to register	Home Affairs delays	Inefficient registration process	Name not on list
Eastern Cape	2%	7%	32%	6%	60%
Free State	3%	4%	1%	4%	7%
Gauteng	30%	18%	5%	27%	5%
KwaZulu-Natal	18%	38%	23%	4%	22%
Mpumalanga	10%	8%	6%	2%	2%
Northern Cape	1%	2%	1%	0,3%	0,3%
Northern Province	10%	11%	17%	38%	2%
North West	17%	4%	7%	11%	0,2%
Western Cape	9%	18%	8%	7%	2%

It is clear that African voters were much more inclined to have experienced problems than members of the other population groups. For example, 74% of these respondents who complained about long queues were black, as were 96% of those who complained about the omission of their names.

The exit poll showed that 79% of the respondents were able to reach their polling station in less than 30 minutes. Thirteen per cent had to travel between 30 and 60 minutes to reach their polling station, while only seven per cent had to travel more than one hour. Polling stations in urban areas were more accessible in terms of travel time than those in rural areas, Nevertheless, the placement of the polling stations generally enabled the respondents to cast their votes without undue inconvenience.

Table 4.10: Problems experienced, by population group

Population group	Long queues	Need to register	Home Affairs delays	Inefficient registration process	Name not on list
Black	74%	71%	78%	66%	96%
White	18%	17%	16%	25%	2%
Coloured	6%	8%	6%	8%	1%
Indian	2%	4%	04%	0,3%	1%

Table 4.11: Time taken to reach voting station

Time	Per cent
Less than 30 minutes	79
Between 30 and 60 minutes	13
More than 1 hour	7

The respondents were asked how long they had had to queue before casting their votes. Just over half of them said they had waited in the voting queue for less than 30 minutes; 13% said they had waited for between 30 and 60 minutes; and a further 14% had waited for between one and two hours. One in five respondents reported that they had had to wait for more than two hours before casting their ballot.

The HSRC exit poll revealed some clear provincial variations in this respect. Voting queues moved fastest in the Western Cape, where almost 80% (79%) of the respondents said they had waited for less than 30 minutes, followed by the Northern Cape where 65% of the respondents said they voted within half an hour. Just over half of the respondents in KwaZulu-Natal (56%), the Northern Province (53%) and the Eastern Cape (52%) waited for less than 30 minutes.

The slowest queues were found in the Free State and North West where, respectively, only 40% and 36% waited for less than 30 minutes. In the latter two provinces just over one-third (34%) of the respondents waited for longer than two hours before being able to vote.

Comparing the 1994 and the 1999 Elections

The exit poll also probed the attitudes of the respondents to the organisational efficiency of South Africa's two democratic elections. The poll showed that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (84%) believed that the 1999 election was better organised than the 1994 election. Just under ten per cent of the respondents believed that the hastily arranged 1994 election was better organised. Six per cent indicated they did not know whether there was a difference while one per cent indicated that there was no difference.

Table 4.12: Queuing time, by province

Province	< 30 minutes	34-60 minutes	1-2 hours	> 2 hours
Eastern Cape	52°/0	12%	14%	22%
Free State	40%	14%	12%	34%
Gauteng	43%	14%	17%	26%
KwaZulu-Natal	56%	13%	13%	18%
Mpumalanga	56%	10%	21%	12%
Northern Cape	65%	18%	9%	8%
Northern Province	53%	14%	20%	14%
North West	36%	15%	15%	34%
Western Cape	79%	10%	4%	7%

The 1999 election (unlike the 1994 election) involved a far more cumbersome procedure in terms of registration, verification, and proof of identity and citizenship. Given this and the difficulties surrounding the reliance on volunteers and late changes to the voting regulations, the favourable perception of this election is somewhat surprising.

Implications of the Exit Poll

Exit Poll and Measuring "free and fair"

The limitations of this (the first) exit poll in the new South Africa need to be explored if the results are to be adequately understood. First, as it was an exit poll,² people who did not vote were excluded from the poll. They included those who were excluded because they failed to register as voters, those who preferred not to vote because they regarded the process as biased or otherwise fundamentally flawed, and those who became so frustrated with, for example, the length of the queues that they left the voting station without voting. These self-exclusive groups probably included the people most disenchanted with the election.

Because an exit poll records the reservations of those surveyed (i.e. those who persevered despite the difficulties), the root causes of the alienation of those who did not vote could, at least in part, be derived from the responses of those who did vote. Obviously this possibility applies more to issues of principle. The upshot is that exit polls tend to reflect on elections somewhat generously, i.e. the findings tend to err in favour of a positive judgement.

Ninety-six per cent of the respondents indicated that in their opinion the poll had been "free and fair". Despite the preponderance of this opinion one cannot summarily pronounce the poll as in fact "free and fair". The ability to measure the impact of the self exclusion mentioned above and the reasons for beliefs that the election had not been "free and fair" should be taken into account. That four per cent of the respondents denied that the election was "free and fair" could be interpreted as a substantial indictment of the process. Such an interpretation would gain credibility if there was a consistent bias in the reasons for the dissatisfaction of the four per cent minority or if they represented a particular sector in society.

However, analysis of the election results showed that there were few significant differences in the response patterns of those who thought the election was "free and fair" and those who did not by age, gender, population group and education.

Neither was there any significant difference between their responses regarding the wider election process falling under the jurisdiction of the IEC. For example, the two groups gave substantially similar responses as to where they learnt most about voting procedures, the display of party political posters in the (prohibited) election area, and the length of time spent queuing to vote.

This suggests that no major socio-economic groups or political party groupings were unduly affected by the election process, at least as far as a "free and fair" **voting** process is concerned. Only minor differences were evident between the two groups with respect to being influenced as to whom to vote for, the ease with which the voting process could be understood, and the rate at which members of the two groups changed their minds while waiting to vote.

Perceptions that the election was not "free and fair" seem to have had various origins. These include feeling pressured to vote for a particular party and difficulty to understand the process. Those who felt the election had not been "free and fair" were slightly more inclined to regard the election process as difficult to understand (ten per cent, versus three per cent of those who regarded the election to be "free and fair"). A more serious factor is that those who felt that the election was not "free and fair" tended to cite being (unfairly) influenced as to whom they should vote for. However the vast majority of those who felt pressured to vote for a certain party identified "friends and family" as the main culprits.

Nevertheless those who claimed the election had not been "free and fair" did not point to issues suggesting a systematic bias. This is indicated by the fact that 92% of those who felt the election had not been "free and fair" had not changed their intended vote while waiting. The eight per cent who changed their vote can be compared to the four per cent of respondents who were of the opinion that the election had been "free and fair" and also decided to change their party preference while waiting to vote.

The high rate of approval of the election process and the lack of any systematic trend among those who disapproved augur well for the freeness and fairness of the election. However the question of self-exclusion is potentially serious and should receive consideration. One of the most widely voiced concerns about the election was the length of time it took to vote at some stations. A slow voting process, long queues, tired staff, etc. can lead to disenchantment with the process. If those problems occurred in the 1999 election in a way that systematically prejudiced any social sector or political party, the election could be considered flawed and perhaps not "free and fair". These problems are explored below in the section on the effect of voting station size on the election process.

Impact of Poll Station Size

An extrapolation of the exit poll findings to the total number of voters indicates that some eight million voters had to queue for longer than 30 minutes to vote. Of these, almost half (3,8 million) had to queue in excess of two hours.

If this time were added to the time the voters spent travelling to the polling booths, the total time taken up by voting in some cases was substantial and may have deterred people from voting. Just under ten per cent of the respondents (about 1,4 million voters) indicated that it took them over two hours to travel to the polling station and to queue and cast their ballots.

The main factor in the need to extend the time required to vote beyond a reasonable maximum was the number of people waiting to vote. The lack of supplies, unskilled staff and logistical problems affected only a small minority of the stations - and then these factors tended to be of importance only at the start of election day. However, having to vote together with several hundred or even several thousand other voters had a decidedly negative effect on the speed with which individuals could cast their votes.

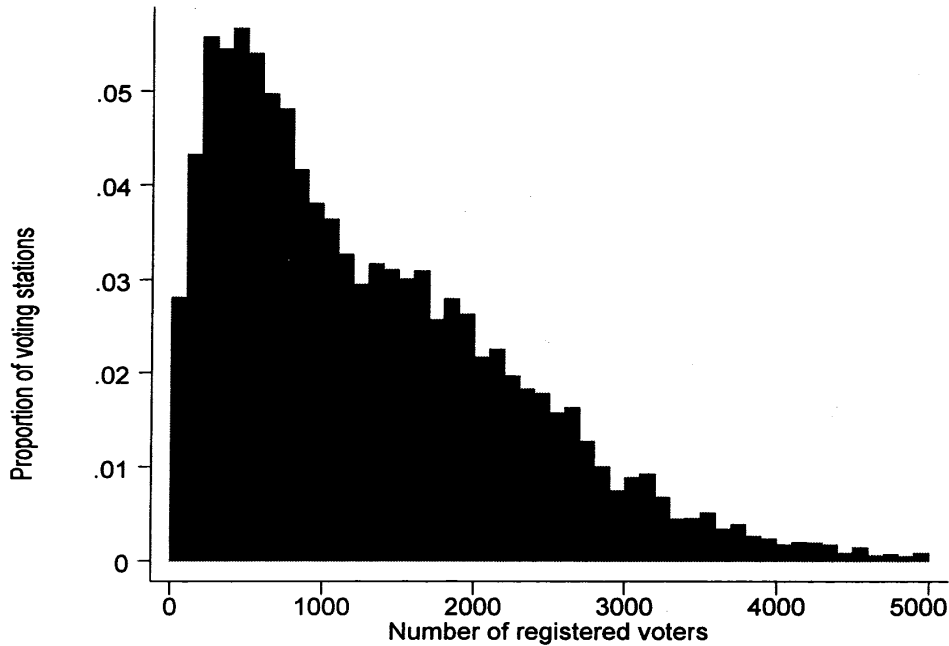
The IEC allocated staff to voting stations on what was in effect a sliding scale. The smaller voting districts were allocated a smaller complement of election officials than larger districts. However the doubling of the number of voters registered at a station did not result in the doubling of the staff allocation. This means (excluding practical difficulties such as the number of access points) that less efficient service to voters correlated with increased station size.

Effect of Voting Station Size

On election day over 16 million votes were cast in approximately 14 000 voting stations. On average each voting station had to accommodate about 1 140 votes or one vote every 45 seconds. However the voting stations did not all carry an equal burden in terms of the number of registered voters in that voting district.³ Some stations were characterised by queues that waited into the night long after the official closing time; others were marked by the speed with which the voting process was completed (see examples in Chapter 5). The differences can be attributed primarily to the number of people attempting to cast their votes at each station and the speed with which individuals were able to cast their votes.

For the vast majority of the voting stations the number of voters was well within the norms established by the IEC. The distribution of voting on sizes (in terms of the number of votes cast) is shown in Figure 4.1 below. The graph shows a concentration of the voting stations on its left-hand side, indicating that any one voting station was likely to be small. Most voting stations had fewer voters than the national average. The most intense concentration of voting stations was in the 500-1000 voter range.

Figure 4.1: Distribution of voters by voting station



The peculiarity of so many voting stations having fewer registered voters than the national average can be explained by the small number of voting stations that had voter numbers well in excess of the norm, i.e. in excess of 3 000 (or even 5 000) voters.

In recognition of differential literacy levels and population densities the IEC went out of its way to cater for the increased demands on rural voting stations. According to the delimitation manual issued by the IEC,

a voting district should comprise approximately 1 200 voters in rural areas and approximately 3 000 voters in urban areas⁴

The realised distribution for the two types of areas is presented graphically in Figures 4.2 and 4.3.

Figure 4.2: Urban voting stations

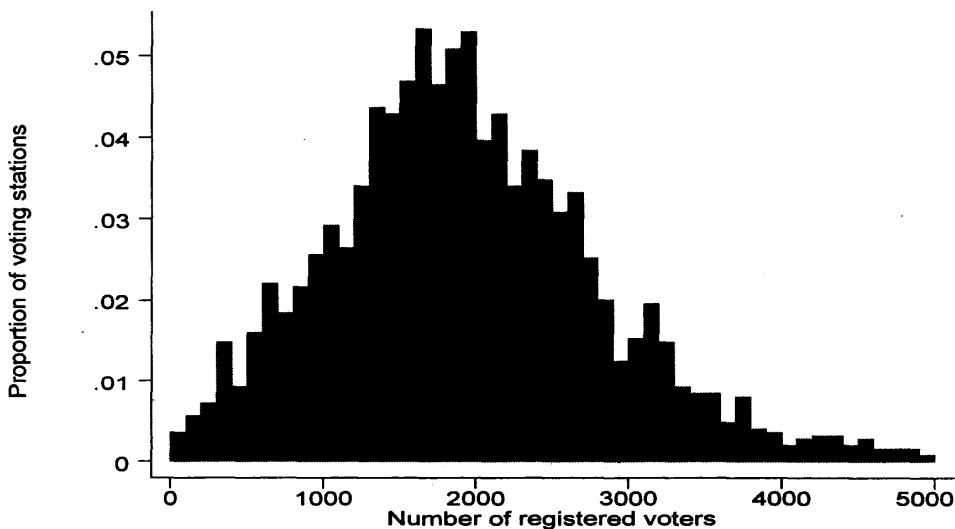
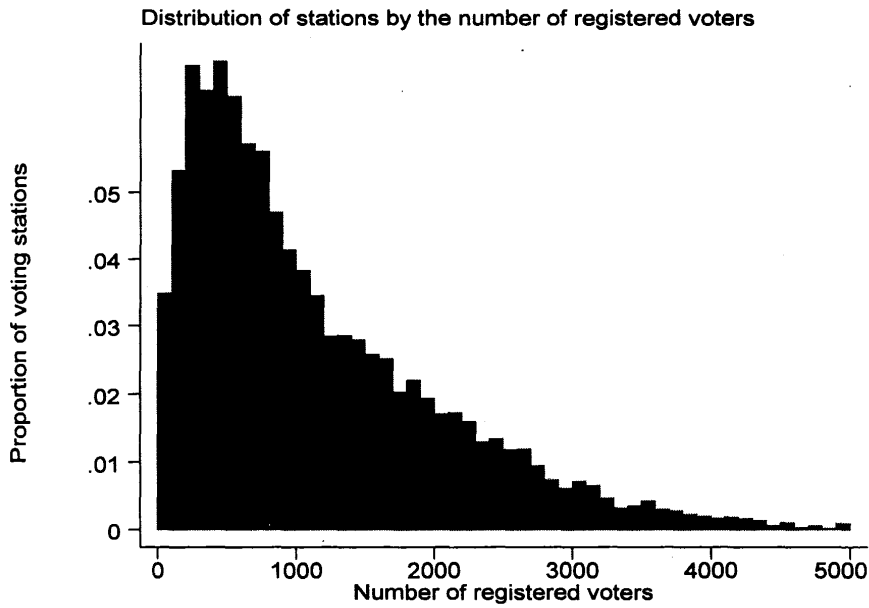


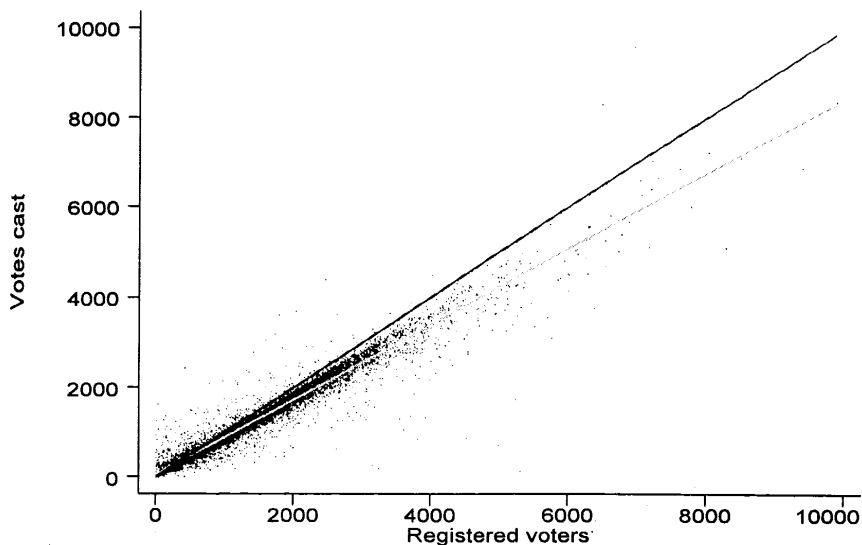
Figure 4.3: Rural voting stations



Although the rural voting stations tended to be substantially smaller than the urban voting stations, they were marked by a wider range in size. For example, more rural voting stations had over 5 000 voters than did urban voting stations. The size of a voting station is pertinent insofar as it determines the ability (or inclination) of voters to register and vote. It is also an important factor if it is assumed that large stations are more likely to have longer queues, more stressed staff and greater logistical problems. Larger voting stations would therefore be associated with a higher rate of spoilt ballots and a higher proportion of registered voters not casting their votes.

The relationship between station size and the number of valid votes cast is represented in Figure 4.4. Had all registered voters cast their votes the scattered points would concentrate about the line of "equality" (the steeper gradient line). The points however scatter about the more gentle gradient line, indicating that as the size of the station (measured now by the number of registered voters) doubled, the number of valid votes cast increased by about 80% only.

Fig.4.4. Relationship between station size and votes cast



This trend was consistent regardless of the size of the voting stations. The smaller voting stations, like the larger ones, had an approximately 80% turnout. This indicates that costs in terms of spoiled votes or votes not cast were approximately the same for the small as for the large stations.⁵ There is thus little *prima facie* evidence that the size of the voting districts prejudiced the voters, at least in respect of turnout rates and spoiled ballots.

This raises the question as to the effect of voting station size on the self exclusion of voters prior to election day, i.e. did the size of the voting districts affect the registration of potential voters?

Registration Effect

Voters were required to register at their voting stations during stipulated periods prior to the election. The same factors that militated against registered voters casting their votes in the larger voting stations could also have dissuaded them from registering in the first place. If this was in fact the case, the exit poll would have missed a potentially important aspect of the freeness and fairness of the election.

The correlation between the number of people of voting age in each voting district and the number of people who registered indicates that the larger voting stations tended to have lower registration rates. This relationship is represented in the scattergram (Figure 4.5).

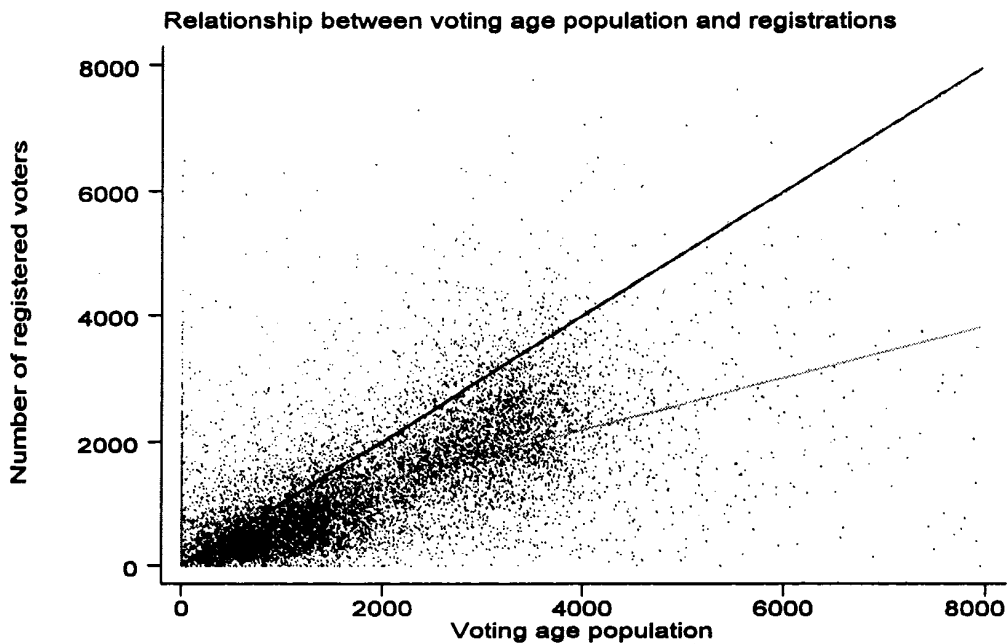
If there were no "cost" to having large voting stations, then anyone residing in a large voting district would be as likely to have registered as anyone living in a small district. However, a comparison of the number of people registered in each district and the population within the voting age in that district shows that as district size increased, the proportion of the population who registered to vote declined.

Figure 4.5 shows that once the voting station size exceeded about 1000 people the actual registration rate (line with gentle gradient) increasingly lagged below the "expected" registration rate (line with steep gradient).⁶ If station size did not affect the likelihood of registration the two lines would have coincided.

This points to evidence of a systematic bias in the election process. The electorate in the larger voting districts may have been prejudiced by the registration process, yet not by the voting process.

Following heated debates and court action, much has been written about the impact of the registration process on particular interest groups. An HSRC survey on identity documents revealed that two social sectors stood to be most prejudiced by the registration process: 1) older whites, "coloureds" and Indians, and 2) younger Africans.

Figure 4.5: Relationship between voting age population and number of registered voters



An analysis of

inter alia the registration effect⁷ on the election outcome indicated that these two groups at the time of the election had divergent party political support profiles which largely cancelled out the registration effect. The registration effect was unlikely to have changed the election outcome, i.e. the actual poll results were largely what they would have been had all citizens of voting age voted.

Conclusion

The exit poll showed that at the time of the poll there was substantial consensus on the election being "free and fair". The dissenting views did not point to significant consensus among dissenters as to why the election was not "free and fair" nor did they offer evidence of a systematic bias prejudicing any substantial social group. Evidence from interviews, media reports and the like pointed to large voting stations as being the "fly in the ointment" as far as an apparently smooth process was concerned.

There was little evidence that large voting station sizes correlated with higher rates of spoilt ballots or lower turnout rates. However, there was evidence that larger voting district sizes correlated with lower registration rates. This "registration effect" nevertheless did not significantly skew the election results. The inordinate size of some voting districts remains an issue of concern through, and possibly offers the IEC a strong focus for future improvements.

Notes

- 1 The finders included the Department for International Development (UK) and the CWCI Fund of the European Union.
- 2 An exit poll involves interviewing respondents after they have exited the voting booths.
- 3 The term "ward" was avoided, as under the voting system candidates were not elected to represent that location. The implicit trusteeship was thus irrelevant.
- 4 The regions were classified as "rural" or "urban" on the basis of census descriptions of their population in 1996. Between 1996 and 1999 some regions, by virtue of housing development or in-migration, can now be described as "urban". However, as the IEC - on the basis of the 1996 data - would have treated these areas as "rural" (initially at least), we do the same for the purposes of this paper.

- 5 The actual valid votes were in excess of 90% of the number of registered voters. The flatter regression line is used to highlight gross trends..
- 6 A log scale has been used on the x-axis. Although this allows the impact of increasing station size to be easily visualised, it appears to accentuate the difference between the rates.
- 7 Alence, R. & O'Donovan, M. 1999. *If South Africa's Second Democratic Election had been held in March 1999 ... A simulation of Participation and Party Support Patterns*. Pretoria: HSRC.