

Chapter 9

Conclusion: Exercising Democratic Citizenship Through Voting: Policy Implications

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This volume was an attempt to measure the extent of democratic consolidation in South Africa by gauging citizen participation in and voter evaluation of this country's second democratic election.

Chapter 1 set out the modalities of the HSRC's election research package, including the study on bar-coded identity documents, public opinion surveys and attitude surveys, as well as the first exit poll to be conducted on election day.

Chapter 2 set out various indicators of democratic consolidation in South Africa, including public support for democracy, deracialisation, gender equality and the strength of civil society. The chapter revealed high levels of support for and institutionalisation of democracy, reflected on continued racial patterns of identification notwithstanding noteworthy shifts towards deracialisation, examined the policy implications of gender preferences in setting national priorities and finally evaluated the strength of citizen participation in civil society organisations. and positive support for public institutions. Overall South Africa made a good start at institutionalising democracy, although democratic behaviour cannot be taken for granted.

The results reported in Chapter 3 showed how the debate around identity documents raised public awareness of the need to acquire a bar-coded identity document in order to participate in the 1999 election. The results also showed the extent to which the IEC established itself as a credible organisation fit to manage the election. Its credibility and its commitment to a confidential voting process were important indicators of the success of the 1999 election. The broad base of positive support for the IEC among the voting population translated into a relatively high voter turnout on 2 June 1999. Although some isolated administrative problems were recorded on election day, South African voters received, by all accounts, a free and fair election.

In Chapter 4 the author set out a number of constraints embedded in the methodology of exit polls. He concluded that the findings erred in favour of a positive judgement of the freeness and fairness of the election, since the 1999 election excluded a number of potential voters from the process by its requirement of bar-coded identity documents and the exit poll's exclusion of people who preferred not to vote.

Chapter 5 contended that although the election appears to have been largely free and fair, fieldworkers' observations pointed to some gaps. First, there was a need for an equitable distribution of voters between voting districts to reduce the incidence of lengthy queues and voter frustration on the day of an election, particularly in densely populated areas. Second, there was a need for the wide publication of unambiguous information in the most feasible format about the location of registration and voting stations to avoid confusion and lack of motivation among the electorate, particularly in remote rural areas. Third, there was a need for more comprehensive training of local electoral officials, well in advance of an election to enable them to cope effectively with enquiries and logistical hiccups on election day.

In Chapter 6, the author assessed the role of competing political parties in the election and concluded that elections are potentially divisive processes, pitting contending parties with their respective policy platforms and organisational machinery against one another in a race for votes. Viewed in this light, the 1999 South African election generated much less conflict than that which pervaded the founding democratic election in 1994. This chapter suggested that the role of the IEC in preparing the country for the election was an important reason for the diminished conflict. The chapter surveyed the views of political parties and some other actors on the IEC's handling of the electoral machinery. Although all political parties, large and small, had negative comments about aspects of the IEC's handling of the election, they felt that the IEC had "done a good

job under the circumstances". Senior figures in each political party repeatedly noted that the 1999 election was conducted in a much better political and administrative environment than the 1994

election. They nevertheless pointed out that the IEC's planning for the 2004 general election had to start soon and not shortly before the next election.

Chapter 7 presented the findings on focus group discussions and concluded that the participants were generally appreciative of the handling of the logistics of the election. They also expressed the view that the success of the election illustrated a deepening of democracy, tolerance and patriotism. They commended the IEC for its management of the election and considered the voting stations to be accessible, voting to be free and fair, and voting procedures to be efficient.

In assessing the outcome of the 1999 election in Chapter 8, the author concluded that provincial variations in the degree of support for each political party were largely but not exclusively attributable to the spatial distribution of the black and the white/coloured/Indian sectors of the electorate. However, black voters were not necessarily the most satisfied about the economic and safety situation in provinces where white voters were the least satisfied, and vice versa. Similarly, when subdivided into three standard of living categories, voter satisfaction with the government did not clearly correlate with standard of living across the provinces. This indicates that the election results were not construable merely as a racial or ethnic census of the electorate. Indeed, the results were greatly informed by a widespread sense of trust in the government, satisfaction with the way it governed the country and a perception that race relations improved since April 1994.

Nine policy guidelines for future elections emerge from the HSRC's elections research. They are therefore presented below as a framework for future elections in South Africa.

The first policy guideline relates to the importance of voter education. It arose from the perception of the focus group and workshop participants that voter education had not been conducted widely enough. This problem was attributable to inadequate resources and lack of, or inadequately trained, personnel. Hence voter education should be a central objective in the total electoral process, and should be conducted under the broad management of the IEC. It should be funded appropriately and timely and should be particularly targeted at rural and illiterate people. It should be introduced well ahead of an election or, better still, be continuously presented as part of more general "democracy education". Experienced voter education trainers should be employed for this task, but the co-operation of non-governmental organisations and the Department of Education should be sought in this regard. Voter education materials should also be translated into the prevailing local languages.

The second policy guideline relates to the importance of registration and the effective maintenance of voters' rolls. Registration proved to be an important step in counteracting fraud, which could have jeopardised the outcome of the election. Despite the success of the 1999 registration, streamlining is still required. Voters' rolls should be updated continually and by various actors - the IEC, political parties, the Department of Home Affairs, local authorities and voters themselves - when listed addresses are changed. Alternatively, a large number of temporary officials should be recruited to conduct door-to-door registration shortly before an election. In any event, registration of non-registered voters for the up-coming local government elections should start now. The actual address of voting stations should also be provided in time to avoid confusion on election day. The IEC should also consider a special programme of registering the elderly and the disabled.

The third policy guideline relates to the importance of providing relevant, thorough and timely training to electoral staff, especially those to be deployed at the local voting stations. This is crucial to ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and understanding to be effective as election observers or presiding officers, and to avoid role confusion. The certification of trained officials would simplify recruitment during subsequent elections.

The fourth policy guideline relates to the need to reconsider voting district demarcation. In 1999, voting stations in black townships, informal settlement areas and inner-city areas tended to experience overcrowding and very long queues. It is essential that the limitation on the number of voters per voting district be limited to manageable numbers. The IEC should therefore bring the demarcation of voting districts in line with the number of registered voters per voting district, but to limit changes to a minimum as voters are easily confused by such changes.

The fifth policy guideline relates to the counting of votes. Evidence shows that many of the officials on duty at the voting stations on election day were too exhausted to count votes. Their bodies

simply "stopped" and many "fell asleep". Appointing a fresh team to handle the counting process could solve this problem.

The sixth policy guideline relates to the clarification and streamlining of the procedures and requirements for declaration and special votes. Most importantly, communication about these to voters and officials well in advance of an election in order to avoid the confusion that occurred in June 1999 is essential. Declaration and special votes should only be permitted under the most stringent conditions, otherwise the quality of voters' rolls might be compromised and the number of votes cast would be suspect.

The seventh policy guideline underscores the importance of collaboration, partnership and joint ventures in working on large-scale projects such as an election. The mammoth task given to the IEC was generally executed through the collaboration of government, the private sector and civil society. The challenge is to cultivate a spirit of collaboration among all levels of society to enhance the electoral process in the future.

The eighth policy guideline relates to electoral funding. Political parties with adequate funding were able to reach larger numbers of voters than small political parties with less funding. The existing legislative framework around electoral funding requires a fundamental review, with due regard being given to international practice and the promotion of multi-party democracy and competition.

The independent evaluation of the election process constitutes the ninth policy guideline. Electioneering was conducted through the media, rallies, poster adverts and billboards on major streets. Apart from the monitoring of media reports on election events by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), the election process was also monitored by several non-governmental organisations.. Indeed, the IEC harnessed its resources well to monitor the election process in order to protect the credibility of the election. The degree to which monitors of the election campaign were representative of the spectrum of parties involved in the election differed from place to place, though.

The HSRC elections studies have illustrated the state of citizen participation in and voter evaluation of the 1999 election. Not only have the key statutory institutions that buttress democracy been established under the constitution, but public support for these institutions is substantial. The extent of habituation to, or institutionalisation of, participation in both public and civil society institutions augurs well for the consolidation of democracy in South Africa. Furthermore, the confidence of the electorate in the ability of the IEC to deliver a free and fair election, and its satisfaction with the IEC's administration of the election process are noteworthy. However, the distribution of voter concentration, queuing time, electoral administration, planning and logistics will have to be attended to before the forthcoming local government elections.

Finally, the 1999 election provided the HSRC with the first major opportunity to test the strength of democratic consolidation since the 1994 election, and to set a valid benchmark for the evaluation of future elections. We trust that this volume will also make a contribution to the literature on elections research.