Exploring the Trends and Factors that Contribute to the Declining Voters’ Turnout in South Africa: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Perspective

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Abstract

In South Africa, one of the democratic human rights of every citizen as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 is exercising the right to vote. Citizens are offered the right to vote as a form of expressing their voice, public participation, influencing decision-making and holding the government accountable. However, citizens globally are motivated or influenced by different factors when choosing their representatives or rule parties. Some citizens look at the viability of the parties’ manifestos, leadership characteristics and behaviour. Given those factors, one of the concerns globally is a steady decline in voting behaviour from eligible citizens and mostly from the youth and to a lesser extent, the elderly. In the South African context, statistics of South Africa, in 2019 outlined that there were 26.1 million registered voters on the voters’ roll. But 9 million South Africans who were eligible to vote did not register to do so. This decline indicates the eligible South African electorate’s inclination to exercise their voting rights. Based on the above concerns, this study (1) intends to explore the trends in voter turnout and (2) also intends to determine the factors that contribute to declining voter turnout in South Africa. The study further adopted Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory to understand the underpinning motivations behind voting behaviour and motivation. This is a qualitative research design in nature and uses secondary data to validate the study objectives. Based on the recent information and statistics, it is revealed that there is a declining turnout in election participation. Voters’ turnout has declined in recent years, from a high of 86.9% in 1994 to 62.66% in 2019. This decline is due to several factors, including disillusionment with the ANC government, poor service delivery, unemployment, corruption, apathy among young voters, and logistical challenges. The study recommends reforms to be employed by the IEC to increase election turnout by utilising an e-voting system to accommodate youth who are daily on the internet and social media platforms.

Keywords: Voters, Vote, E-Voting, Elections, Democratic Human Rights, South Africa, Democracy, Public Participation.

INTRODUCTION

In a democratic state such as South Africa, one of the democratic human rights of every citizen as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 is exercising the right to vote. In 1994, South Africa became a democratic state (Mamokhere, 2020). Mhlongo (2020) and Kgobe (2020) concur that South Africa is a democratic state with a governmental system that allows citizen participation which was attained in 1994, marking a significant shift in the political landscape from the National Party to the African National Congress (ANC). The democratic government came with a reform by introducing the Constitution which prioritises the bill of rights such as the right to vote. “The right to vote in South Africa is one of the fundamental rights recognised by the Constitution” (Mhlongo, 2020). Moreover, post-1994, a new electoral system managed by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) was introduced, replacing apartheid-era voting restrictions based on race (Ndwayi, 2024). The Former Chief Justice of South Africa, Pius Langa described the Constitution as transformative, aiming to eradicate past discrimination and promote human dignity, equality, and freedom. The Constitution enshrined an array of human rights, including the right to make political choices and vote. Voting, a form of expression, is intrinsically linked to freedom of expression. Through voting, citizens convey their political aspirations, thus ensuring a democratic and inclusive political landscape.

Seanego & Mogoboya (2019) indicate that over the past twenty-five (25) years, following six (6) consecutive democratic elections in South Africa from 1994 to 2019, there has been a significant decrease in voter turnout among eligible citizens. Despite the constitutional guarantee of the right to vote in secret elections for any
legislative body, as outlined in Section 19(3)(a) of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), many citizens have chosen not to exercise this fundamental right (Seanego & Mogoboya, 2019). This trend, highlighted by van Vollenhoven (2015), prompts an examination of the factors contributing to the decline in voter participation in South Africa. In May 2024 which marks thirty (30) years of democracy, South Africa is set to witness the 7th democratic election. Mathekga (2024) opines that the future of South African elections is uncertain due to signalling potential power shifts and policy changes and the Electoral Amendment Act 2023 which allows for individuals who are not associated with political parties to stand in national elections. Based on this point, the author(s) of this study argue that the ANC is facing several challenges, and it is unclear whether it will be able to maintain its dominance in the long term. The Democratic Alliance (DA) is also facing challenges, and it is unclear whether it will be able to become a viable alternative to the ANC. Overall, South African elections have been characterized by a dominant party system, declining voter turnout and increasing electoral competition. Thus, this study (1) intends to explore the trends in voter turnout and (2) also intends to determine the factors that contribute to declining vote turnout in South Africa.

**Theoretical Framework – Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

This study relies on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, introduced by Abraham Maslow in 1943. The theory posits that people have varying levels of needs that ought to be fulfilled in a specific sequence, with lower-level needs taking priority over higher ones. However, Maslow himself suggested that this sequence is not rigid, therefore, the needs change differ from one person to another due to their preferences or choices. This theory is relevant in this study because the study seeks to explore voting behaviour, influence, and choices. The study uses the theory to understand “what is the motivation behind”, “how people vote” and “why people vote”. Figure 1 below depicts a pyramid of the hierarchy of needs at the bottom and higher-order needs at the top.

![Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](image)

In the context of voting motivation and decision-making by citizens, Mamokhere (2021) indicated that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which is a motivational theory can provide some insight into the factors that contribute to citizens’ decisions, choices, and motivational factors. Here’s how the theory is applicable in this study context as presented in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation Needs</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Relevant Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physiological Needs</td>
<td>At the most basic level, citizens need food, water, shelter, and other necessities to survive. During the election or voting period, communities often make their choices or decisions based on their physiological needs like water, food, and shelter. For example, citizens often vote for political parties or individuals whose promises or manifestos resonate directly with their physiological needs. Most citizens are concerned about poor service delivery such as water and electricity shortages, therefore, a party with a clear strategic plan has the potential to influence citizens voting choices and</td>
<td>Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1987; McLeod, 2018; Mamokhere, 2021.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need Theory*  
*Source: McLeod (2018)*

*Table 1: Motivation needs and application in the study context.*
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety Needs</td>
<td>Once people’s physiological needs are met, they need to feel safe and secure. In the context of service delivery protests, communities may be protesting because they don’t feel safe in their neighbourhoods, or because they feel that their safety is being compromised by the lack of essential services such as policing and emergency services. During elections, citizens often vote for parties that prioritise their safety by looking at how the government intends to eradicate crimes; the country’s sovereignty, free from corruption and a safe living and work environment.</td>
<td>Maslow, 1943; Ntsala &amp; Mahlatji, 2016; Mamokhere, 2021.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love and belonging</td>
<td>After their physiological and safety needs are met, people need to feel that they belong and are loved (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1987). It can be argued that individuals may be motivated to support political candidates or parties that they perceive as addressing their sense of belonging and love needs. Politicians who effectively communicate empathy, understanding, and a commitment to addressing community concerns such as basic service delivery may resonate more strongly with voters who feel a lack of belonging or connection within their jurisdiction.</td>
<td>Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1987.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteem Needs</td>
<td>Once people feel a sense of belonging, they need to feel respected and valued. In my knowledge, this could translate into voters seeking acknowledgement of their cultural identity, socioeconomic status, or contribution to society. Political parties that address these needs by affirming the dignity and worth of individuals, especially within diverse communities, may get support. Conversely, parties that fail to respect or acknowledge these needs may struggle to connect with voters who seek validation and respect in their political choices. Today, most of the manifestos by different political parties focus on corrupt-free governance and they promise good governance.</td>
<td>Maslow, 1947.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Actualization Needs</td>
<td>The final level of needs is self-actualization needs, which includes the need for personal growth and self-fulfilment. By making an appeal to their needs for self-actualization which includes self-actualization and personal development. One might persuade citizens to vote for a particular political party by highlighting possibilities for people to reach their full potential and follow their dreams, political parties can modify their language and programs to appeal to these requirements. Initiatives that support social mobility, entrepreneurship, education, and job development can appeal to voters’ aspirations for personal growth and fulfilment. Furthermore, voters looking to make a significant contribution to society and the larger community may be drawn to political parties that support innovation, societal advancement, and cultural development. Parties can entice voters to support them by presenting themselves as advocates for both individual and group growth and offering the chance to satisfy their need for self-actualization.</td>
<td>Maslow, 1987; Sindane, 2010.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compiled by the author/s (2024)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology as it benefited heavily from secondary data as a design for collecting relevant data. Based on the nature and setting of this study, the author(s) has analysed the secondary data also referred to as the existing literature about the voter trends and factors contributing to declining voter turnout in South Africa. By adopting the qualitative research method, the authors were able to draw a meaningful conclusion from this study. Table 2 below presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria undertaken in this study:

Table 2: Research Publications Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
<th>Exclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publication Date</td>
<td>Publications published from 2009 to the present (April 2024) about trends in voter turnout and factors leading the declining voters’ turnout.</td>
<td>Publications published before 2009 and publications not relevant to the Study objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Populations</td>
<td>Original Research Articles: Peer-reviewed journal articles; Conference proceedings; Published thesis and Dissertations, Peer-review books, commentaries, and other internet sources about trends in voter turnout and factors that contribute to poor participation in national, provincial, and local elections only in South African context.</td>
<td>Book reviews and editorials were excluded.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Only English written publications were considered. Other languages publications were not relevant to the research topic in question.

Only publications that focus on South Africa were considered to understand the trends and factors that contribute to declining voter turnout.

The study considered fifty (n=50) publications as the target sample, but only twenty-seven (n=27) were included in this study because they were more relevant. Twenty-three (n=23) publications were excluded as they were considered irrelevant to the topic and did not focus on South Africa's elections.

Compiled by the author/s (2024)

Table 2 above presents the criteria used to explore the inclusion and exclusion of publications in the literature review. This study demonstrated a rigorous and systematic approach to data collection and analysis. The author conducted an extensive electronic search across various databases, including Google Scholar, Google, DOAJ, Scopus, and university repositories. The search was conducted over four months from January 2024 to April 2024 and included only sources published in English to ensure consistent quality across all studies. The author/s thoroughly reviewed fifty (n=50) research publications, acknowledging, and citing only twenty-seven (n=27) that were deemed relevant. The author/s used purposive sampling techniques, removing duplicate publications, and carefully selecting studies to ensure the quality and reliability of the data. The author/s employed the thematic content analysis approach to analyse the secondary data, which was reviewed from publications in different databases. While this study is limited to qualitative research methodology only, the author's systematic approach and unbiased selection process ensure the reliability of the data. Moreover, ethical considerations were considered, with all publications used being freely available in the public domain. Overall, this study serves as a valuable resource for anyone seeking to understand the trends in voter turnout and factors that contribute to poor participation in national, provincial, and local elections in South Africa.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Trends on Voters’ Turnout in South Africa

This section intends to understand trends regarding voter turnout in South Africa, highlighting a consistent decrease in the number of people participating in elections over the years – 1994-2019. The 1994 National Election, this election, marked the end of the apartheid regime and the beginning of democracy in South Africa, had a remarkably high voter turnout of 86.87%. This high level of participation was likely due to the historic significance of the election and the enthusiasm surrounding the country's transition to democracy (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2023). During the 2019 National and Provincial Election there was a notable decline in voter turnout. Only 66.1% of registered voters participated in this election, signalling a significant drop compared to the 1994 election. Despite efforts to promote civic engagement, such as voter education campaigns, the turnout fell substantially (Mashudu, 2024). Lastly, in the 2021 Local General Election (LGE), the trend of declining voter turnout continued in the most recent election in 2021. This time, only 45.86% of registered voters cast their ballots. This represents a further decrease from the already diminished turnout in the 2019 national election (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2023; Mashudu, 2024). The table and figure below outline the trends in voter number turnout using Limpopo Province as a case study.
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Table 3: Limpopo Province Election Statistics 1994-2024

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Registered population</th>
<th>Total valid votes</th>
<th>Spoilt votes</th>
<th>Total votes cast</th>
<th>Voter turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>1 847 766</td>
<td>1 658 694</td>
<td>25 137</td>
<td>1 683 831</td>
<td>91.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2 187 912</td>
<td>1 614 514</td>
<td>21 947</td>
<td>1 636 461</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2 256 073</td>
<td>1 491 072</td>
<td>22 549</td>
<td>1 513 621</td>
<td>67.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2 438 280</td>
<td>1 462 186</td>
<td>18 409</td>
<td>1 480 595</td>
<td>60.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>2 608 460</td>
<td>1 452 158</td>
<td>18 072</td>
<td>1 420 230</td>
<td>56.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2024</td>
<td>2 777 210</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by Author/s (2024) using the IEC dataset

Based on Table 3 and Figure 2, it is noted that over the past decades, South Africa has witnessed fluctuations in voter turnout, as evidenced by the data provided above in Table 3 and Figure 2. In 1994, the country experienced a flow of enthusiasm and participation in its first democratic election, with an impressive turnout of 91.13%. This historic event marked a pivotal moment in South Africa's history, symbolizing the end of apartheid and the dawn of democracy. As time progressed, however, voter turnout began to decline. By the 1999 election, participation had dropped to 74.8%, signalling a decrease in the initial passion for the democratic transition. Despite this decline, voter engagement remained relatively high compared to later years. In the following elections of 2004 and 2014, voter turnout continued to decrease steadily. By 2004, only 67.09% of eligible voters cast their ballots, reflecting a gradual erosion of enthusiasm or perhaps growing disillusionment with the political process. This trend persisted into 2014, with participation dropping further to 60.72%. By the most recent national election in 2019, voter turnout had dwindled to 56.36%, marking a notable departure from the high levels of engagement seen in the early years of democracy. This decline may raise concerns about the health of South Africa’s democratic institutions and the extent of citizen participation in shaping the country's future.
Factors that Contribute to the Declining Voters’ Turnout in South Africa

This section intends to explore different factors that contribute to the decline in the number of voters in either National or Provincial elections. However, it is critical to highlight the evidence of a decline in number of voters per age population. According to Bartlett (2019), “the voting-age population (VAP) is simply the number of people living within the country of voting age (that means over 18 years old in South Africa, as in most countries). This number is usually accurately known from census data”. Below is a graph comparing the VAP turnout of South African parliamentary elections to the major elections in the UK, the US and France as outlined in the study by Bartlett (2019).

Based on the above Figure 3, we see that since the 2004 elections, the voting-eligible population turnout in South Africa has consistently been much lower than in the UK and France, and a little lower than in the US. Also, voter turnout plunged dramatically in the 2019 South African elections, from 57% to 49%. However, in other countries, there is a rise in the number of eligible voters who are dedicated to transforming their country and voicing their concerns. Based on this discussion, it is now clear that there is an evident decline in voter turnouts. Therefore, it is now important to explore different factors contributing to this concern. Seanego & Mogoboya (2019) concur that there has been a progressive decline in voter turnout over the years and there are several reasons behind this. Below are some of the key factors that lead to a decline in voter turnout in South Africa:

Unfulfilled Promises by Political Parties

Masinga (2021) implies that the decline in voter turnout in South Africa can be attributed, in part, to unfulfilled promises by political parties. Over the years, many parties have made ambitious pledges in their manifestos to address pressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality. However, the failure to deliver on these promises has led to a growing sense of disappointment among eligible voters. As citizens become increasingly sceptical of politicians’ ability to effect meaningful change, they may feel discouraged from the electoral process and opt not to participate. This lack of trust in political institutions and representatives undermines the legitimacy of the democratic system and contributes to voter lack of interest. Masuku & Jili (2019:2) cited in Fransman & von Fintel (2024) indicate that “a large body of literature has emerged identifying persisting public service delivery challenges faced by South Africa over the years. The South African government’s tardiness in the provision of basic services to its citizens and numerous unfulfilled promises have caused much frustration
and public service delivery protests among its citizens (Masuku & Jili, 2019:2). Due to the inability of the government to provide the services that the majority of South Africans have waited for, the exuberance that accompanied the dawn of democracy has now been replaced by growing signs of unhappiness and lack of participation in electoral processes” (Nengwekhulu, 2009:341).

**Perpetual Poor Service Delivery**

Mamokhere (2022) indicates that poor service delivery in South Africa is a significant factor contributing to the decline in voter turnout. When citizens continuously experience inadequate access to essential services such as water, electricity, healthcare, and education, it undermines their trust in the government’s ability to address their needs and improve their quality of life. Frustrated by persistent service delivery failures, many voters feel discouraged and disengaged from the political process, leading them to question the efficacy of participating in elections. Consequently, as the cycle of poor service delivery persists, voter turnout continues to decline, highlighting the urgent need for government accountability and effective governance to rebuild public trust and encourage civic participation. On the other hand, Wade (2017) confesses that the low voter turnout in South Africa, which is manifested in the decline of voters from the accumulated figures from 1994 to 2014, may be affected by various factors such as poor education, poor service delivery, unemployment, corruption, and crime.

**Corruption, Nepotism and Unethical Leadership**

In South Africa, corruption, nepotism, and unethical practices have contributed to the decline in voter turnout. Citizens' lack of interest in the political system stems from a perceived lack of accountability and integrity among those in power. Rampant corruption scandals have eroded trust in government institutions, leaving voters feeling disempowered and discouraged to vote (Runciman & Bekker, 2021). In Runciman & Bekker (2021) study,

One respondent said:

“According to me … this thing of voting is useless because there is corruption, and we are not working. This voting this is not working for us”.

The prevalence of nepotism and cronyism further undermines confidence in the fairness and transparency of the electoral process. One respondent captured this sentiment succinctly, expressing frustration that voting feels futile in the face of pervasive corruption and the failure of elected officials to address the needs of the populace. This sentiment reflects a broader trend of voter apathy and poor participation driven by a sense of disillusionment and disenchantment with the political status quo (Bekesiene, Petrauskaite, Kazlauskaite & Markeliene, 2021). As the author of this study, I also hold the view that participating in elections seems futile as political figures often prioritize the appointment of their relatives over merit-based considerations, thereby perpetuating a culture of corruption within government.

**Rising Unemployment Rate**

Mokgonyana (2023) indicates that the rising unemployment rate in South Africa is making it harder for people to participate in elections as they believe that their voting does not matter. According to Statistics SA, the unemployment rate in South Africa is currently quite high, with many people unable to find work. This means that a lot of individuals feel disconnected from the political process, thinking that their vote won't make a difference in their lives. As a result, the decline in voter turnout could partly be because people are feeling disheartened or uninterested in their prospects, and voting might not feel like a priority when they’re facing economic hardships. The study by the South African Institute of Race Relations (2023) indicated that:
“In our democracy, political parties, the provision of proper service delivery and attempt to eradicate unemployment. People will not vote if the dominant idea in their minds is "nothing will change" or "What good is my vote?" The numbers show the ever-growing need to restore our confidence in the democratic process”.

AP News (2024) indicates that the African National Congress (ANC) has been in government since the end of the apartheid system of white minority rule in 1994 but has seen its support gradually wane over the last 30 years, largely because it fails to deliver jobs, housing, and services to millions of poor people. South Africa’s unemployment rate, already the highest in the world, rose to 32.1% in the fourth quarter of 2023.

Lack of involvement of youth in political participation

Masinga (2021) implies that youth disengagement from political processes and institutions is a significant contributing factor to the declining voter turnout in South Africa. Despite comprising a substantial portion of the population, young people often experience feelings of apathy and disillusionment with political leaders. These sentiments, along with perceptions of systemic corruption and limited access to voter education and political participation, exacerbate the problem. The lack of active involvement from the youth demographic, who represent the future of the country, poses a risk of perpetuating the decline in voter turnout and undermining the democratic legitimacy of elections (Masinga, 2021). Furthermore, the South African Institute of Race Relations (2023) states that:

“These low voter numbers indicate a clear loss of faith…and lack of confidence in the political system. Hence youth are not participating because they lost faith and confidence in the ruling government due to lack of employment opportunities”.

Wiese (2011) indicates that “meaningful youth participation involves the recognition and encouragement of the strengths, interests, and abilities of young people by providing them with opportunities to become involved in decisions that affect them. It can thus safely be stated that democracy cannot be consolidated without the people's participation in various processes like the legislative process, and once the youth is allowed to influence these processes, they will also be more willing to participate in government initiatives such as election processes, budgeting, and integrated development planning”.

Discussions of Theoretical Findings

The study highlights a concerning trend of decreasing voter turnout over the years, pointing to issues such as unfulfilled political promises, inadequate service delivery, corruption, nepotism, and poor leadership. In addition, some of the issues include increasing unemployment rates and limited youth involvement in political processes as contributing factors. These findings underline the importance of rebuilding public trust, promoting public participation, and addressing the evolving needs of the electorate to reverse the trend of declining voter participation. By recognizing the underlying motivations behind voter behaviour, such as the desire for meaningful change, effective leadership, and opportunities for personal growth, policymakers can tailor their strategies to resonate with citizens at a deeper level. Moreover, the study emphasizes the significance of addressing citizens' needs at different levels of Maslow's Hierarchy, from basic physiological requirements to higher-order aspirations for self-actualization and community development. By understanding and responding to these needs, political parties and policymakers can foster a more inclusive and participatory democracy that reflects the values and aspirations of the South African population.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, the worrisome decrease in voter turnout in South Africa poses significant concerns. Several factors contribute to this decline, including unfulfilled political promises, inadequate service delivery, corruption, nepotism, poor leadership, increasing unemployment rates, and insufficient youth involvement in political engagement. Addressing this issue requires rebuilding public trust, and promoting civic engagement through accountability, efficient governance, and voter education initiatives. Ultimately, the democratic process depends on the active participation of all individuals in elections, and it is imperative to exercise the constitutionally guaranteed right to vote to influence South Africa's future. This study further concludes by highlighting the importance of voting due to declining turnout in South Africa. Voting is an essential tool for bringing about change in communities. By using your right to vote, you can elect better politicians who can
deliver better service delivery, infrastructure, jobs, education, and more. Participating in the election process also keeps the government in check by ensuring their competence and accountability. Participating in elections is an important opportunity to make your voice heard and shape the future of South Africa. Democracy depends on the full participation of all people in elections, and you have the constitutionally entrenched right to vote, which is an important right that some people died for in the past.

REFERENCES


