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New voices, new era

Tomorrow's election will be a crucial test for South Africa's young democracy. The country's youth is eager to hit the refresh button on its regime

The upcoming 2024 election is set against the backdrop of increased voter discontent and political uncertainty, particularly amongst young people. In an election that will see the introduction of a third ballot, which would include independent candidates, and a record 52 parties contesting for the 400 seats in the National Assembly, the stage is set for South Africans to make a bold statement on our outlook for our shared future. For young people in particular, this election may signal a shift in our collective thinking about democracy and usher in a political culture that is more engaging and dynamic and places democratic systems under more scrutiny than ever before.

Youth voter registration statistics in South Africa for the upcoming elections show a significant increase compared to previous years. This year, young people make up about 42 per cent of the voters' roll, translating to just under 12 million registered young voters. To put this in perspective, the African National Congress, the ruling party since the dawn of democracy, secured victory in the 2019 election with approximately 10 million votes, in an election that saw the lowest voter turnout since 1994. The introduction of electronic voter registration, coupled with concerted efforts by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) as well as civil society actors to motivate young people to register, has yielded powerful results.

Perhaps the most riveting development in this election is the inclusion of independent candidates to contest seats in the National Assembly. Following a landmark Constitutional Court ruling that declared the Electoral Act unconstitutional over its exclusion of independent candidates, South Africans will, for the first time, be able to directly elect people to Parliament. This will diversify political representation and strengthen democratic engagement. Five independent candidates will be competing with political parties for 200 regional seats in Parliament — an adjustment made by the IEC to allow for independent candidates within the proportional representation system. The remaining

200 seats will be contested by political parties only. Whilst laying a strong foundation for a more inclusive democracy that, in an ideal world, sets the tone for direct accountability over party loyalty and patronage, this development has also meant managing a complicated transition for an IEC that is being systematically defunded and is losing trust amongst young voters.

Lack of real representation

Between 2022-2025, the National Treasury has planned to cut the IEC's budget by a staggering 800 million South African rand, with the Commission losing 240 million rand in this crucial election year alone. In practice, the IEC has stated that key activities such as implementing the changes to the Electoral Act, planning for electoral reform post-2024, piloting an electronic voting system and recruiting new staff, will be severely compromised.

Hampering the IEC's ability to deliver free and fair elections in an efficient way has long-lasting effects on perceptions of democracy, particularly amongst young people. During the compilation of the South African Youth Manifesto (a publication focused on gauging youth perceptions of democracy and expectations for the upcoming election), Youth Lab asked young people about their levels of trust in the IEC. They found that an increasing number of young people are losing trust in the Commission as well as faith in transparent and fair elections. These sentiments have been shared across all South African provinces and though the insights gained are anecdotal, they point to a mismatch between the work of the IEC and the way that work is perceived by the young public. Many young people in South Africa feel that the IEC is not exempt from the rampant corruption that exists in all spheres of government, and that the results of elections do not reflect the realities of their communities. The difficulty here is that, with dwindling resources, the IEC isn't fully capacitated to address these growing concerns whilst also administering voter education and managing a dynamic and complicated election process.

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One of the other crucial factors playing out in this election is the glaring leadership vacuum in South Africa. Increasingly, young people are looking for leaders who are more representative of them, their needs and values. South Africa finds itself at an interesting political intersection, with the memories and effects of Apartheid still fresh in our collective memory. But perhaps, for many first- or second-time

gangsters, amongst others.

voters, these memories are tucked away in a box at the back of the attic, called upon during the retelling of stories by older generations, as to be expected in a democracy that has just turned 30. Thus, the political hold of a once revered liberation movement exists only as a gentle tug amongst young voters, who yearn for younger leadership that could restore faith in our government and provide a sure foundation for our developmental future.

When asked what comes to mind when they hear the word 'government', young people had much to say: unaccountable, old age, greed, thieves, deceitful, selfish, bribes and gangsters, amongst others. 'Democracy' received similar treatment: racism, crisis, fictional, fickle and failing were some of the words used. Young people are eager to hit the refresh button on our politics. One of the key questions asked during the South African Youth Manifesto research work is whether young people would vote for a president under the age of 35. Consistently, even during the 2019 election, the answer throughout the country was a resounding 'YES!' Interestingly, there isn't a single presidential candidate on the very long ballot who is under the age of 35.

Young people fully acknowledge and experience the lasting effects of apartheid. They appreciate the role of institutional memory and strongly value the need for intergenerational collaboration, but they're looking for leaders who can reflect the demographics of the voting population and can lead with a vision for the future, rather than leaders who are emboldened by the memory of the past. With a growing number of young people on the party lists for Parliament, it is sure to be an exciting, albeit challenging journey into transforming the country's political leadership. And still, it is one that, if it is to succeed, will bear great fruit.

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Finally, young people are organising themselves to vote around specific issues, unemployment being at the top of every list. As of early this year, unemployment rates in the 15-24 age category hover at a catastrophic 64 per cent, ranking among the highest globally. Between the skills mismatch, the unavailability of jobs due to an economy that's not growing at a meaningful rate and the rising cost of living, young people are desperate for a solution for jobs and an economy that can stimulate and support employment. Parties that can speak

authoritatively and think laterally about employment will carry great favour amongst a balloon of unemployed young people ready to burst.

Twenty-nine May 2024 is going to be a pivotal day in South Africa's young democracy. Young people have registered in record numbers and have shown a greater interest in educating themselves and others about the ways this democracy can and should work for them. In an election that will see crucial changes for a healthy democracy, against a complex backdrop that straddles historic institutional damage and a destructive hold on new power, this election will speak volumes about the state of a democracy that was so hard fought for. Young people will speak through the ballot this week, and their voices demand and deserve to be heard.



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