

Factors Contributing to the Decline of Votes in South Africa: A Case Study of Mankweng Community

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Abstract: One of the basic democratic rights of citizens of any country in the world is voting. However, global statistics depict a steady decline in voting from eligible voting population of the world, particularly the youth and to a lesser extent, the elderly. According to Statistics South Africa, in 2019, there were 26.1 million registered voters on the voters roll. However, 9 million South Africans who were eligible to vote did not register to do so. This decline indicates that eligible South African electorate's appetite to exercise their voting right has dissipated. The question is why? This article seeks to examine factors which contribute to the decline of votes in South Africa using Mankweng community as a case study. Its objective is to investigate reasons behind the low voter turnout among eligible South African voters, utilising Mankweng community as a microcosm. The researchers have used qualitative research method which adopted random sampling when accumulating data from Mankweng community members. Fifteen (15) eligible voters from a total population of twenty-eight (28) from Mankweng community were incorporated in the study for data collection. Open-ended interviews were used as data collection tools. Rational Choice Theory was employed to undergird the study. The study found that the majority of Mankweng community members of voting age, especially the youth and, to a lesser extent, the elderly believe that the government does not adequately add value to their lives. As a result of this vexing concern, South Africa is challenged by a worrying trend of dwindling voter turnout from its electorate.

Keywords: Citizenship, Democracy, Elections, Electorate, Mankweng community, Rights, Voting

1. Introduction

After six seamless years of democratic elections in South Africa, which make twenty-five years from 1994 to 2019, there has been an enormous decline of votes from South African citizens. Many South African citizens who are eligible to vote have been steadily refraining from doing so. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), Section 19(3) (a) of the Bill of rights, stipulates that, "Every adult citizen has the right to vote in elections for any legislative body established in terms of the constitution, and to do so in secret". However, according to van Vollenhoven (2015), it is depicted that South African electorate have not been duly exercising this right. As a result, this study seeks to investigate factors which contribute to the decline of votes in South Africa.

According to Vasquez (2017), voting is a fundamental right of any citizen to elect the preferred leaders of their choice. Douglas (2013) states that when citizens collectively elect representatives they affirm the idea of governing themselves through free choice. Mehlape (2016:17) asserts that through casting votes we, as citizens, "protect our inherent right to make choices, regardless of our identity or

social class". Free choice is the hallmark of democracy. Furthermore, voting is not only a platform for citizens to exercise their democratic right; it is also a viable avenue to conscientise them about their citizenship. Moreover, voting, as a right, underscores the establishment of any democracy (Douglas, 2013). According to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, every citizen who is eighteen (18) years and above, is eligible to vote. In other words, the right to vote for any party of one's choice is enshrined in the Constitution of the country. Lindell (2019) states that voting is an expression of preference in terms of which party should govern the country. As a result, everyone should be given the leverage to vote because they are entitled to their free choice. In addition, Vallve (2011) mentions that voting portrays the desire to take everyone's opinion into consideration rather than imposing the decision of one group on the other group. Furthermore, people should be granted space to cast their votes freely and fairly.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is underpinned by the Rational Choice Theory which, like a mirror, helps crystallise the

reasons behind the (de)motivation of the electorate during the voting process. Lovette (2006:238) posits that, "the point of Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is to show that certain social phenomena can be explained with reference to their usefulness in solving problems arising from the general pursuit of self-interest". In the voting context, the Rational Choice Theory assists voters to calculate the costs and benefits of voting in order to derive their conclusion of whether they vote or not. In this instance, the low voter turnout, particularly in South Africa, is caused by the fact that citizens do not see the necessity to vote as the government does not fulfil its duties towards them. This theory elucidates that voters only decide to cast their votes if they are guaranteed service delivery by the government of the day. It emphasises that people vote based on their rational choice. Their behavioural pattern is (de)motivated by their rational decisions towards voting. Furthermore, this theory serves as a barometer of this article in that it helps ground the reader's understanding of what dampens the rational choice of voters against voting in South Africa. Through its incorporation in this article, readers will better assimilate the reasons for the lacklustre voting behaviour displayed by many South Africans.

3. The Importance of Voting

In every country, government representatives are elected by the citizens (Chapman, 2019). The only process used to do this is voting. According to Ferguson, Ali, Olfert and Partridge (2007), voting is one of the critical measures that individuals can use to influence government's decision-making. In addition, Greg (2018) stipulates that without a vote, citizens are fundamentally voiceless. This shows how crucial voting is in selecting the government that is trusted and capable to lead its people. This article posits that voting is an invaluable tool for citizens to elect their democratic form of government. Agu, Okare, and Idike (2013) aver that voting is the most visible and widespread of citizen involvement in issues affecting their country.

According to Kour (2018), electoral participation, through voting, is not just about supporting a favoured party, candidates or issues occurring in the country; it is also about supporting democracy. Democracy is a system where people become part of the decisions of their community or nation (Carvalho, 2019). Consequently, citizens can only have a say or freely practise their democratic right through voting

(Cortinars, 2018). Cortinars (2018) further notes that for citizens to be change agents and have influence, they must vote. When people vote, they entrust those who have been delegated into government with the responsibility of being accountable representatives and catalysts for change hence the importance of voting.

4. Voter Turnout

Voter turnout is determined by the number of eligible voters who show up at the voting stations during the day of elections (Hutt, 2018). There are people who register to vote and never turn up on election day. Conversely, there are citizens who do not register at all, which automatically disqualifies them from voting. The study conducted by Schulz-Herzenberg (2014) reveals that the voter turnout is examined as a proportion of the eligible voting-age population over 20 years. The figures confirm a decline in participation from 86% in 1994 to 72% in 1999, and 58% in 2004. Only in 2009 a slight rise to 60%. However, this was followed by a drop to 57% in the 2014 elections. Schulz-Herzenberg (2014) declares that there was a decline of eligible South African voters during the investigated election periods. This is a concerning matter because freedom was not delivered to the majority of people on a silver platter. Blood was profusely shed for the attainment of this universal suffrage. It is for this reason that South Africans must jealously guard this democratic right by going to the polling stations in droves during elections. Disappointingly, South African eligible voters are apathetic when it comes to exercising this democratic right hence the low voter turnout at the voting stations during the voting season.

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. He further states that the voting can be a laborious challenge to citizens; both the process of registering and turning up at the voting stations. Person, Sundell and Ohrvall (2014) contend that citizens only vote if the benefits of voting outweigh the costs. Even though the right to participate in the elections is the fulcrum of democracy, citizens do not vote (Mahler, Jesuit, Paradowski, 2014). They stay away from the polls because their political representatives only show up during election canvassing season to proselytise

them to vote. According to Chapman (2019), many citizens do not participate in elections because they think that the political system is unresponsive to their needs. Poor or lack of service delivery is one of the reasons for their abstinence from voting (Nathan, 2016). In addition, Wade (2017) declares that the lackadaisical voting response from citizens ensues from the perception that their votes do not matter. They are only used as voting cows.

Miracle (2008) indicates that some of the reasons which contribute to voter apathy include, *inter alia*, busyness, scheduling conflicts, illness, forgetfulness, not registered to vote, transportation problems and inconveniences. He further shows that out of all these hindrances, older people from 65 to 74 years of age usually outvote those of any eligible voting group. This occurs primarily because old people comprehend that voting is one of the fundamental tenets of democracy. They also fathom the sacrifices people made in order for this democracy to come into being. Majority of them have, in different ways, experienced oppression prior to 1994. In other words, they know what it feels like to live in bondage hence their unwavering appreciation of exercising their democratic right of going to the polls in large numbers notwithstanding the political infelicities which the country is facing.

4.1 Factors Contributing to the Decline of Votes in South Africa

Tracy (2016) unearthed the following factors which compound low voter turnout in South Africa since the maiden elections in 1994:

4.1.1 Unemployment

South African electorate, mostly the youth, desist from voting because of the unfulfilled promises from the government of the day about the provision of jobs (Tracey, 2016). Daniel (2018) mentions that "According to a report published by The Economist's Pocket World in Figures, South Africa has the highest youth unemployment rate of any other country in the world". According to Carvalho (2019), Statistics SA show, "The unemployment rate in South Africa decreased to 27.1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2018 from 27.5 percent in the previous period. Unemployment rate usually falls in the last quarter of the year due to higher job activity during the festive season. However, a year earlier, the rate of jobless people was lower at 26.7 percent". The figures show that unemployment is a

vexing issue in South Africa. This is one of the main reasons why the youth are despondent about going to the polls. According to Mthethwa (2019), there is a group of young people who do not participate in the elections because they feel that politicians renege on their electoral mandates. He further reveals that 35.7% of South African population is youth. Evidently, "Statistics revealed in Pocket World put the youth unemployment rate at 57.4%". The youth are the ones who are at the coalface of these detrimental challenges. As a result of these vague and oftentimes, empty employment promises by politicians, young people get discouraged from participating in the electoral processes.

4.1.2 Poor Education

Education, particularly when it is sound, is the accumulation of an understood knowledge with skills that are implemented in the actual world for the development of a country. Majority of South African citizens are dissatisfied with the quality of their education because they feel that there is a disjuncture between their needs and the curriculum in that it does not empower them. In other words, the curriculum does not talk to the economic needs of the country hence the advent of the scourge of youth unemployment. Thus, many young graduates roam the streets unemployed because the education system has not equipped them with the necessary skills that are geared towards the socio-economic development of the country. According to Morries (2018), "South Africa's deficient education system is the greatest obstacle to socio-economic advancement, replicating rather than reversing patterns of unemployment, poverty, and inequality and effectively denying majority of young people the chance of a middle class-life". This denotes that education should emancipate people from all their everyday challenges and struggles. It must help them face their tomorrow with a spring in their feet. This is, however, not the atmosphere in South Africa today hence the decline in voter turnout at the polling stations during elections.

4.1.3 Poor Infrastructure and Service Delivery

Poor infrastructure and lack of service delivery are also part of the major concerns which contribute to the low voter turnout in South Africa, and they are inextricably intertwined. These two factors have cause and effect on each other. For example, impassable roads amount to lack of access to critical amenities such as hospitals, clinics, schools and even voting stations (Nhlapo, Anderson & Wentzel, 2007).

According to Mamabolo (2016:28), "Post 1994, South African government has always acknowledged that there were serious infrastructure backlogs, which include roads, health, telecommunications and housing". Regardless of this acknowledgement, robust interventions have not been made on the matter. Neglected road infrastructure is still a major cause of road accidents, low economic output and damage to motor vehicles. Thus, if roads are not drivable, they tend to threaten the lives and livelihood of citizens, and cause them to be dispirited on issues of voting and politics in general.

4.1.4 Corruption and Malfeasance

Corruption and malfeasance are not a blemish in South Africa government only, but they are an eyesore in many governments the world over. The electorate want to elect ethical and corrupt-free leaders; those with impeccable credentials and unquestionable integrity (Adejumobi, 2000). According to the study conducted by Haffajee (2019), one of the young concerned South African citizens who was interviewed by the *Daily Maverick* said:

"I think the government is not fair. To get a job, you must pay a bribe. You only get a job if you know someone. Employers only hire their relatives or friends. I do not know anyone in government. I will vote but I do not know why it is important".

Young people display their impatience and agitation by staying away from voting. Regardless of their hard work at universities, it is still a challenge for them to get a breakthrough in the workplace due to corruption. The perception of this interviewee indicates loss of hope in the government of the day. This is evident when she states, "I think the government is not fair". Beaton (2016) also highlights that politicians are self-serving hence the youth's restlessness about voting for them.

5. Voter Reform

In a country with such a low voter turnout, voter reform is needed. From 1994 to date, things have changed for the worst in terms the voters' zest. Young people have caused an electoral anti-climax by withdrawing *en masse* from electoral participation. Not only is this withdrawal caused by the foregoing factors but they are also engendered by the archaic voting methods which are unappealing to them. Voting venues are also incompatible with their dispensation. Youth want voting to be

digitised in tandem with the fourth industrial revolution that is currently on us. According to Kenski (2005), voting reform intends to bring two kinds of changes: proliferating levels of participation and changing the outcome of the results of the electorate. In addition, reformers hope that the increase in turnout usually brings the electorate approximately to the total number of the population who are eligible to vote. Mehlape (2016:15) corroborates this point by stating that "there is a need for voter education in South Africa before the actual election process takes place". Voter education assists in communicating "information about when, where and how they [voters] should register to vote" (Mehlape, 2016:23).

Benda (2009) states that young people have long been identified as the collective of electorates who disengage from electoral participation. The study conducted by Miracle (2008) affirms that older voters (65-74) perpetually form part of the electoral participation than any other age group. This reveals that older people do not have problems voting as compared to the youth. Wade (2017) agrees that the reason behind the disengagement of youth in the electoral participation is because voting cannot be done electronically. According to him, electronic voting is relevant for young people as many of them spend most of their time online. In addition, Kenski (2005) highlights that, "As we enter the new millennium and look to technology to rejuvenate the efficacy of and enthusiasm towards electoral participation, it may be that internet voting will become the main feature of 21st century elections". Wade (2017) and Kenski (2005) perceive internet voting as a convenient platform that can improve youth participation in elections. It is an established fact that most of the youth spend much of their time online. As a result, this new voting reform can be accommodative in that it resonates with them. Mbenga (2015) assents that, "the opportunity that the internet possesses, for example, allows the youth to use new social media for political discussions and conversations". This normally leads to the formation of public opinion, in some instances, which usually raises people's awareness about the importance of electoral participation.

6. Methods and Materials

The paper utilised qualitative research method guided by a case study of Mankweng community. Researchers accumulated data from a randomly

sampled number of fifteen (15) members extracted from the total population of twenty-eight (28) eligible voters in Mankweng area. The aim of this random sampling was to establish reasons which drive citizens to either vote or desist from voting. Open-ended interviews were used to gather authentic data which is not limited by the discussion and engagement of the researchers and the participants. Data which was gathered from participants was thematically analysed. Thematic analysis permits researchers to form themes from data collected in order to analyse results. Through open-ended interviews, researchers intended to understand factors which contribute to the decline of voter turnout in South Africa.

7. Results and Discussion

This paper adopted qualitative research as a method of accumulating data. In this case study of Mankweng community, participants were incorporated through random sampling. Researchers intended to find out people's perceptions of electoral participation using the randomly selected participants as cases in point. They, furthermore, wanted to understand why people register to vote but later on refrain from doing so. Moreover, they also sought to examine factors which encline or disclose them from voting. Open-ended interviews were used by the researchers in order to get data from participants.

7.1 Have You Registered to Vote?

Out of fifteen (15) eligible voters, only six (6) were not registered to vote. Their reasons encapsulated, *inter alia*, the following: commitments, misunderstanding of politics and lack of interest. One of the participants was a student at the University of Limpopo. This student did not see the need to be part of the electoral enterprise. According to him, there is no point in voting.

"Throughout the year, politicians are very silent and nowhere to be found. It is only during the time of elections where they commence to do societal visits. This proves that, it is actually about them than the people they claim to be leading".

From this participant's view, it is clear that politicians are perceived to be self-centered, egocentric and selfish. This is one of the contributing factors that dissuade people from voting.

7.2 What Has Influenced Your Decision?

Researchers asked one of the eligible participants who did not register to vote about what has influenced the decision not to do so. The participant who is 23 years of age responded:

"The government makes a lot of promises and eventually fails to fulfil them. They only respond when we go on strike. It is pointless to even vote. The people we put in power only remember us when they need our votes. Once they win the elections, they do not come back. Infrastructure is very poor in our community. The same goes for service delivery. Crime has escalated. The vast majority of young people are unemployed. However, the government and the so-called politicians are doing nothing about it".

The participant referred the researchers to the recent crime scene that transpired in Polokwane to indicate to them the extent to which voting is fruitless to him, particularly when criminals brazenly murder law-abiding citizens with impunity.

7.3 Are You Satisfied with the Current Government?

Each participant, in the study, was not satisfied with the performance of the current government. Their major concerns revolved around unemployment and poor service delivery. One of the elders in the community of Mankweng who kept her name anonymous said:

"The government promises us jobs, but never delivers. Corruption is prevalent. They only hire those whom they know. As a result, I do not see the reason why I should waste my time to vote for a political party that does not care about me".

The issues which are faced by the members of the community are very serious. They massively affect voter turnout in an adverse manner. People are discontent with the current government. They feel undone by it hence the erosion of interest to vote.

7.4 How Long Have You Been Voting?

From the fifteen (15) participants, two (2) elders have been voting since 2000. Even though they were appreciative of the social grant they get from

government, unemployment remained a concern to them. They asserted:

"The social grant from the government is helping. However, it is not enough. Our children attend school but eventually fail to get employment. Universities are no longer our hope. Our children go to universities and come back home the same way they left. This matter gives us sleepless nights".

Poor quality of education negatively influences voter turnout. A university student aged 24 stated:

"I am doing my Masters in English Studies and PGCE with UNISA, hoping to get employment. As a first-time voter, I wish the political party that I am going to vote for will make a difference. It is heart-breaking to be having qualifications but without employment. Our parents are losing hope in our education system. And voting is becoming irrelevant because politicians do not assist with anything".

7.5 Are You Satisfied with the Methods of Voting Utilised in the Country?

Out of all the fifteen (15) participants, those who were eligible to vote but opted not to register wished that voting was done online. When they were asked about their perception of internet voting, they literally recommended that it is perfect because it saves time and money. Participants complained about queues at the voting stations. One of them responded:

"Even though I wished to vote, my schedule sometimes would not allow me. However, if it was internet voting, we would create time to vote as it is convenient".

Nevertheless, older people in the study did not recommend it. They preferred their old method of voting even though the lines are tiring.

7.6 Education

Education is a key to the prosperity of any country while the educated youth of any country foreshadow a bright future for that country because the youth are the custodians of tomorrow. However, participants in the study hold a contrary view because they claim that South African education system is of questionable quality hence the unacceptably

high unemployment rate of young graduates. The economy cannot absorb these youth because of lack of articulation between the job market and the education system. Students must be offered curriculum that will enable them to be instantly employed after completing their studies. One of the participants said:

"I have a daughter who has graduated. She has been applying for jobs and nothing is happening. If the education system was that important, why is she home like she has never attempted to become anything in life? This is the reason why it is not convincing for me to vote".

Citizens have lost hope in the country's education system and government in general, hence the decline in voter turnout at the polling stations during elections. Researchers have, through this study, discovered that South African citizens are dejected with the education system. This is one of the contributing factors to the decline of votes.

7.7 Service Delivery

Service delivery is also one of the almost insurmountable challenges faced by the community of Mankweng. Participants elucidated that during the campaigning season political parties deliver enticing speeches about the content of their manifestos but quickly renege on those promises once they are elected into office. Roads were one of the examples given by the participants. They complained that their roads were full of gaping potholes, some were left incomplete (*bemuda* roads), some were swept away by rains and were left in a state of disrepair. All these service delivery bottlenecks compel residents of Mankweng to be nonchalant about electoral participation. One of the eligible unregistered voter participants responded that:

"Whether I vote or not, that will not make a difference. These people have their own motives. T-Shirts will not give us a better life. It seems as if they buy us with their T-Shirts while avoiding our wellness".

The common finding from all the participants is that politicians are inward looking. They get into politics for self-gain not to serve the people. This self-serving practice among politicians is the main reason why people have lost their voting appetite because, to them, whether or not they vote, the *status quo* will remain the same; unchanged.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The steady decline in voter turnout has perpetually been identified since 1994 to date. This study elucidated some of the factors which contribute to the loss of voting appetite by many South Africans. Youth are the major culprits in this voter apathy exercise because they have and are still withdrawing in droves from electoral participation notwithstanding the reality that voting is one of the fundamental democratic rights. This is because they (youth) are, of all the age groups in South Africa, the most hard-hit by unemployment despite their high qualifications. The study found that the youth and the general South African citizenry epitomised by the elderly people of Mankweng, fervently believe that the government does not duly add value to their lives. As a result of this profound concern, South Africa is encountering low voter turnout from her people.

Prior to 1994, many South Africans were disenfranchised on the basis of colour, race and creed. However, in the post-apartheid era, universal suffrage is granted. The study established that it is imperative to participate in elections even though majority of young people hold a contrary view because of factors which have been outlined in the better part of this article. These youths are, however, unaware of the fact that by being election bystanders, they are part of the problem. They are complicit to the politicians' criminal betrayal of the people's trust. They should know that elections are a bloodless, non-violent, democratic and civil way of putting into power or out of power of governments. According to the study conducted by Tracey (2016), there are four fundamental areas and opportunities that can persuade the youth and citizens in general, to participate in elections:

8.1 Meaningful Engagement with the Youth

This study revealed that some of the youth withdraw from the electoral participation due to political misunderstanding which leads them to blindness about the necessity to vote. Therefore, politicians, government, non-governmental organisations and the business sector must ensure that they organize seminars, workshops, and effective dialogues with citizens on voter education. This initiative will permit citizens to speak about their concerns, dreams and visions about the kind of government they envisage and how it should be voted into power. This will

rekindle their interest in voting as they shall have gained insight into what voting entails.

8.2 Voting Reform

It has been two decades and a half since the demise of apartheid. Times have rapidly evolved. This study found that, today, youth spend most of their time online. This technological development is, unfortunately, not fully manifested in the South African voting system hence these youth's frustration with voting. It is because they consider it (voting system) boring, inconvenient and outdated because it is still, mainly, manual. This study, therefore, recommends that scholars, IT specialists and political researchers do more research on the possibility of introducing a user-friendly internet voting system which will accommodate majority of voting South Africans, most importantly the elderly, the disabled and the disadvantaged. This will help galvanise people, particularly the youth, into participating in the electoral processes as this digitised voting system will serve as a drawcard.

8.3 The Necessity for Various Stakeholders, Government and Politicians to Find Innovative Ways to Engage the Youth in the Elections

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram occupy the better part of the time of the South African youth. These platforms can be used innovatively and effectively to engage the youth. As youth participation in the use of different social media platforms proliferates, chances of convincing them about the importance of voting as a democratic right, using these social media platforms, will be heightened.

8.4 Review of Existing Civic and Voter Education Programmes in Schools

Accessible information on civic and voter education in schools can bring more awareness to the youth. As they comprehend why they should vote, chances are that they will become active participants in the elections, and politics of the country in general. This approach is recommended because a country with a vision, invests in its youth. The more they are informed, the better chances of their involvement in the electoral process of their country. This will improve voter turnout at different polling stations during the elections. Patriotism will also be harnessed by this initiative.

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