



The 'turnout' driven election

South Africa

*In this note we look at the possible implications of voter turnout on party performance next year. We also assess several factors that contribute to the trend of declining voter turnout in South African elections. Voter turnout has the potential to swing election results in one direction or another and in an election as competitive as the 2024 poll will be, we expect it to play a key deciding role. This is why parties are investing in voter registration campaigns. It is highly likely that voter turnout will substantially decline further next year as was the case in the 2021 elections. **Our baseline is that turnout will decline by eight to ten percentage points.** Opposition parties will have a lot of work to do to encourage voters to turn up to vote as for these parties, ANC supporters opting to stay away from the election is not good enough. To enhance their chances of forming a governing coalition (exclusive of the ANC), opposition parties will need ANC voters to switch allegiance rather than just not vote – we show actually why knocking the ANC below 50% requires huge turnout swings. The other challenge for these parties is the ANC's countrywide reach. We must mention that surveys which do not make turnout assumptions tend to create confusion about the potential outcome of next year's elections.*

Voter turnout is generally considered to be good for democracy. This is mainly because election results in high turnout scenarios are more reflective of the will of the people than in low turnout scenarios. Voter turnout has been on a downward slope in South Africa as the sharp decline in the 2021 elections showed. As a result, there is a concern that this trend may worsen next year despite the importance of the 2024 elections. With coalitions on the cards, parties will want to profit from the expected African National Congress (ANC) decline to increase their vote share and therefore improve their bargaining positions in coalition negotiations. This is why parties will campaign extensively for increased voter turnout.

Defining voter turnout

There is a wide range of ways to define voter turnout. Voter turnout can be defined as the absolute number of votes cast; the number who voted out of the voting age population; the number who voted out of the number of eligible voters; the number who voted out of the number registered; or the number who voted out of the size of the electorate.¹ From its calculations, it is clear that the IEC defines voter turnout as the total number of people who voted in an election out of the total number of people registered to vote.² Clearly defining voter turnout is important because it can affect the turnout rate.

¹ Benny Geys. 2006. "Explaining voter turnout: A review of aggregate-level research". *Electoral Studies* 25(4), 637-663.

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KRUTHAM 2024 BASELINE.

ANC 47 [57.5] (strong up risk)
DA 25 [20.8] (downside risk)
EFF 12 [10.8] (downside risk)
ACSA 4 [-] (balanced risk)
IFP 5 [3.4] (balanced risk)
Proto 5 [-] (downside risk)
Other 3 [7.6] (Upside risk)
Turnout -8 to -10pp

Note we have reinforced the upside risk we see for ANC though not changed the numerical forecast yet

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Determinants of voter turnout

A causal relationship between voter turnout and satisfaction with democracy is assumed by many including the media and academics. Higher voter turnout rates are generally conceived as reflecting higher levels of satisfaction with democracy. We must mention that there have been suggestions that low levels of turnout can also be associated with high levels of satisfaction with democracy.³ The assumption here is that when voters are happy with the general state of the country, they may not see the need to vote as much as they would if the country was in a state of decline. While the mechanics of this relationship are conceived in varying ways, the bottom line is that satisfaction with democracy is viewed as affecting or determining voter turnout. Filip Kostelka and André Blais interestingly challenged this conventional thinking, finding rather that voter turnout affects satisfaction with democracy.⁴

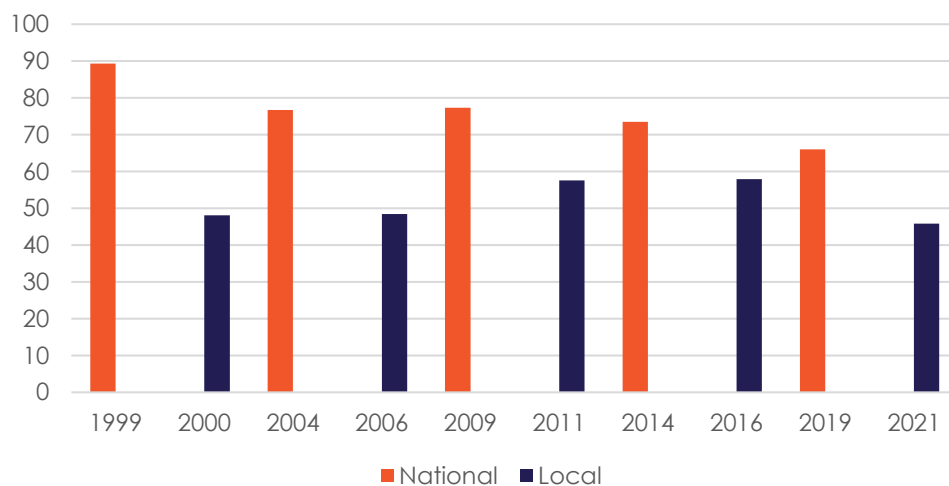
Table 1: Voter turnout in national and provincial elections

Election	Registered voters	Total votes cast	Voter turnout
2019	26,756,649	17,672,851	66%
2014	25,390,150	18,654,771	73.48%
2009	23,181,997	17,919,966	77.3%
2004	20,674,923	15,863,558	76.73%
1999	18,172,751	16,228,462	89.3%

Source: IEC

As the table above demonstrates, while voter registration has constantly improved since 1999, voter turnout has fluctuated over the years. However, over the past two elections, turnout has been on the decline.

Figure 1: Voter turnout in LGE and national elections (%)



Source: IEC

² IEC. 2019. "2019 National and Provincial Elections Report". *Independent Electoral Commission*. <https://www.elections.org.za/content/Elections/Election-Report--2019-National-and-Provincial-Elections/>

³ Lawrence Ezrow and Georgios Xezonakis. 2014. "The Chicken and Egg Question: Satisfaction with Democracy and Voter Turnout". *Party Politics*, 1(12). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1354068814549335>

⁴ Filip Kostelka and André Blais. 2018. "The Chicken and Egg Question: Satisfaction with Democracy and Voter Turnout". *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 51(2), 370-376. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ps-political-science-and-politics/article/chicken-and-egg-question-satisfaction-with-democracy-and-voter-turnout/30ED7C7D82E9FE34ED1EC30A7029A5BF>

In 2021 voter turnout declined by 12% percentage points. This marked the lowest voter turnout since the advent of democracy. As a result, a national debate on factors contributing to low turnout ensued. After its dismal performance, the ANC found solace in low turnout numbers, arguing that its voters simply “chose to stay away” from voting rather than vote for other parties. It is for this reason that the party maintains some hope of retaining a majority in 2024. Looking at the turnout numbers, none of the explanations of the causal relationship between voter turnout and satisfaction with democracy provide a neat account of the fluctuations of turnout in South Africa.

In addition to satisfaction with democracy, voter turnout can also be influenced by factors such as election type (in South Africa local government elections have generally had low turnout rates), the electoral system, election outcomes, weather on the day of the election and the day of the week on which an election takes place.

South Africans' satisfaction with democracy

It is interesting that according to Afrobarometer, seven in 10 South Africans (70%) are not satisfied with the way democracy works.⁵ In addition, 72% of South Africans expressed willingness to forgo elections if a non-elected government could provide security, jobs and housing. These findings emanate from a survey conducted by the pan-African research network in 2022 and were released in June this year. The survey also finds that 63% of South Africans do not feel close to any political party. This is important for turnout forecasting. In fact, the survey finds that 14% of the respondents would not vote if an election was held tomorrow, whereas 32% would vote for the ANC, 12% for the Democratic Alliance (DA) and 11% for the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).⁵ Moreover, 9% do not know how they would vote while 15% refuse to say. These numbers are significant for the marginal vote and overall voter turnout.

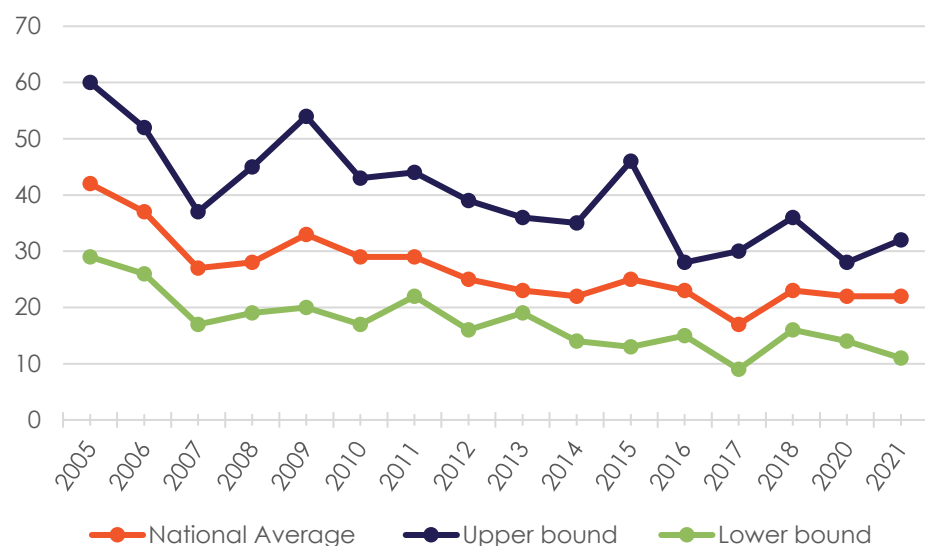
In the same survey, Afrobarometer found that 65% of South Africans believe that elections are the best way to choose their leaders, while 30% were in favour of adopting other methods for choosing the country's leaders.⁶ The survey also found that 64% of the country's population does not believe that elections work well to enable voters to remove leaders who “don't do what the people want”. In addition, 61% do not believe that elections ensure that members of parliament reflect voters' views. These figures are helpful indicators of citizens' views on elections and therefore in making turnout forecasts. However, we must remember that elections cannot help with holding elected leaders accountable during their term of office, they can only do this after the leaders' terms have expired which is not very useful. Moreover, to ensure accountability from leaders, those same leaders whom the public seeks to hold accountable would need to contest the subsequent election. In that way, the public can “remove” them from power by not re-electing them. Several proponents of electoral reform have pointed out how the country's electoral system does not enable voters to hold leaders accountable.

⁵ Afrobarometer. 2023. “ANC clings to lead in a hypothetical election, but South Africans' faith in democracy is weak”. *Afrobarometer*. https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/News_release-South-Africans-faith-in-democracy-is-weak-Afrobarometer-14jun23.pdf

⁶ Afrobarometer. 2023. “South Africans support elections but doubt their efficacy, express little trust in Electoral Commission”. *Afrobarometer*. https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/News_release-South-Africans-support-elections-but-distrust-Electoral-Commission-Afrobarometer-13jun23-1.pdf

Another interesting deduction from the Afrobarometer survey is that only 28% of the population trusts the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) while 64% lacks trust in it with 39% stating they do not trust the commission “at all” and 25% having “just a little” trust in the IEC.⁶ Considering the IEC’s relatively “clean” image, these findings are surprising. Importantly, lack of trust in an institution that administers elections is a vote of no confidence in the elections themselves and therefore in democracy. This could have profound implications for voter turnout. Lack of trust in the IEC, elections and democracy could motivate abstention from voting.

Figure 2: Public trust in political parties (%)



Source: IEC, HSRC

In addition to the findings made by Afrobarometer, the graph above from the IEC indicates low trust in political parties, with an average of 27% for the period 2005-2021. In their article, Collette Schulz-Herzenberg and Robert Mattes argued that the ANC’s dominance is partly sustained by opposition parties who fail to provide a viable alternative to dissatisfied ANC voters. The two academics found that 44% of the respondents who voted for the ANC in 2014 were dissatisfied with the party’s performance in government and willing to consider switching parties.⁷ However, they added that these voters were only likely to make the switch to an opposition party if they believed it was competent enough to manage government affairs or if they held positive views of the party’s leader.

The multitude of factors cited above point to an expected further decline in voter turnout. Considering the decline in turnout during the 2021 local government elections (LGEs), stakeholders have a mammoth task in encouraging voters to register to vote but also to actually turn up at voting stations on election day.

⁷ Collette Schulz-Herzenberg and Robert Mattes. 2023. “South Africa’s ruling party is performing dismally, but a flawed opposition keeps it in power”. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-ruling-party-is-performing-dismally-but-a-flawed-opposition-keeps-it-in-power-207422>

Weather

Bad weather is widely recognised as a factor determining voter turnout. However, there is no agreement on its precise effect. A widely cited study of the impact of weather on United States (US) presidential elections found that rain reduces voter participation by a rate of less than 1% per inch, while an inch of snowfall decreases turnout by almost 0.5%.⁸ Another study relating to US presidential elections published in 2017 found that for every 10°C increase in temperature, voter turnout increased by 1.4%.⁹ In relation to Swedish elections, Mikael Persson, Anders Sundell and Richard Öhrvall found no evidence that rainfall during elections negatively affects voter turnout. In the South African context, no study has been dedicated to extensively examining the impact of weather on voter turnout. It is also worth noting that elections in South Africa typically take place during the autumn season. As such, they are less likely to be affected by adverse weather such as rainfall or snowfall.

One important factor that affects turnout is the cost and/or benefit of voting. **Error! Bookmark not defined.** This is broad and includes factors such as how far the voting station may be from the voter. This is why knocking out the vote is important (more on this later). The IEC recently completed the re-delamination of voting districts to ensure ease of access for voters. For our interest, bad weather is also viewed as a cost associated with electoral participation. Voters weigh this cost against the benefits when they decide whether to vote or not vote on days affected by bad weather. **Error! Bookmark not defined.** The introduction of online voting, which was strongly punted in 2021 could eliminate the impact weather has on voter turnout. Online voting however remains a distant dream in South Africa.

Day of the week

The day of the week in which an election takes place matters. The timing of elections is a notable concern in US literature, with much of it arguing for making election day a public holiday. Fortunately, in South Africa election days are typically declared public holidays. This ensures that voters are not tied by work commitments and are therefore able to cast their vote. Moreover, elections in the country are typically held on a Wednesday. The exception here is the 2000 LGE which was held on a Tuesday which was not a holiday. The exceptional 2021 LGE was held on a Monday which was however a holiday. The one issue with weekday voting is that it could hinder the participation of those who do not reside in their homes or permanent residences. Considering South Africa's work-related internal migration, having elections on a weekend could perhaps expand participation.

It is worth noting that voters must be registered in the voting district in which they ordinarily reside in order to participate in elections. One study conducted after the 2021 LGE found that 34% of the sampled non-voters cited individual barriers for not participating in the election, with being

⁸ Brad T. Gomez, Thomas G. Hansford, and George A. Krause. 2007. "The Republicans Should Pray for Rain: Weather, Turnout, and Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections". *The Journal of Politics*, 69(3), 649–663.

⁹ Jasper Van Assche, Alain Van Hiel, Jonas Staeus1, Brad J. Bushman, David De Cremer and Arne Roets. 2017. "When the Heat Is On: The Effect of Temperature on Voter Behavior in Presidential Elections". *Personality and Social Psychology*, 8. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00929/full>

outside of one's registered voting district on election day, being at work or simply being too busy featuring commonly.¹⁰

In the table below, we use Johannesburg weather (due to Gauteng's electoral importance) to demonstrate the interaction between voter turnout, the day and date on which an election is held, weather and voter turnout. Due to the dates on which elections are held, the impact of weather on voter turnout appears to be negligible. While the weather data may not be 100% accurate, it provides an indication of likely weather conditions on election days.

Table 2: Weather (Johannesburg) and date of election

	Turnout (%)	Day	Date	Temperature
		National		
1999	89.30	Wednesday	02-Jun-99	20°C
2004	76.73	Wednesday	14-Apr-04	Unavailable
2009	77.30	Wednesday	22-Apr-09	17°C
2014	73.48	Wednesday	07-May-14	13°C
2019	66.05	Wednesday	08-May-19	18°C
		Local		
2000	48.06	Tuesday	05-Dec-00	27°C
2006	48.40	Wednesday	01-Mar-06	26°C
2011	57.6	Wednesday	18-May-11	15°C
2016	57.94	Wednesday	03-Aug-16	17°C
2021	45.86	Monday	01-Nov-21	28°C

Source: Weather Underground, World Weather and Weather Spark

Eligible voters

We reiterate that it is important for stakeholders to encourage voter registration. The IEC recently confirmed that its main challenge is getting people to register to vote rather than getting them to cast their vote when they have registered. While figures vary, in 2021 Ipsos reported that South Africa had 42.6 million eligible voters, with 26.2 million (61,6%) registered to vote.¹¹ As of 20 October, the IEC had 26,176,474 registered voters. With Statistics South Africa revealing that in 2022 South Africa's population stood at 62 million, the number of eligible voters has definitely changed. Stakeholders therefore need to pay attention to the unregistered but eligible voter.

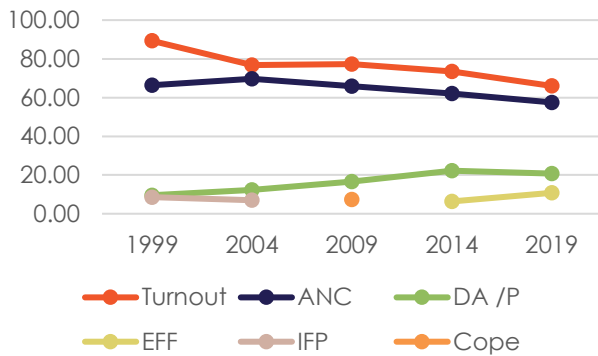
¹⁰ Carin Runciman, Martin Bekker and Carol Mbeche. 2021. "Analysing voter abstention in the 2021 local government elections: A view from five metropolitan municipalities". *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Centre for Social Change*. <https://www.kas.de/documents/261596/10543300/Voter+abstention.pdf/f68bc266-00e4-8070-f074-3b466ac5119f?version=1.0&t=1638354848974>

¹¹ Ipsos. 2021. "A third of South Africans will decide the outcome of the local government elections" Ipsos. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-za/third-south-africans-will-decide-outcome-local-government-elections>

Impact of voter turnout on party performance

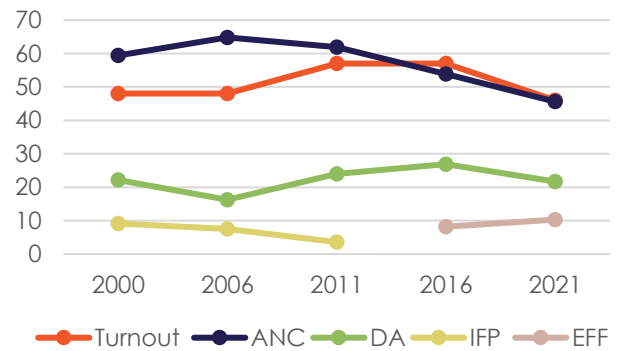
It is interesting to note that the ANC's only electoral performance improvement in national elections (in 2004) coincided with a major decline in voter turnout from 89% to 76.73%. Note the DA's performance in relation to turnout in LGEs.

Figure 3: Voter turnout vs party performance [national] (%)



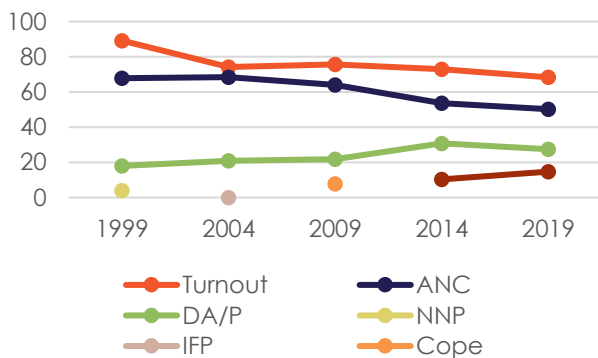
Source: IEC

Figure 4: Voter turnout vs party performance in LGE (%)



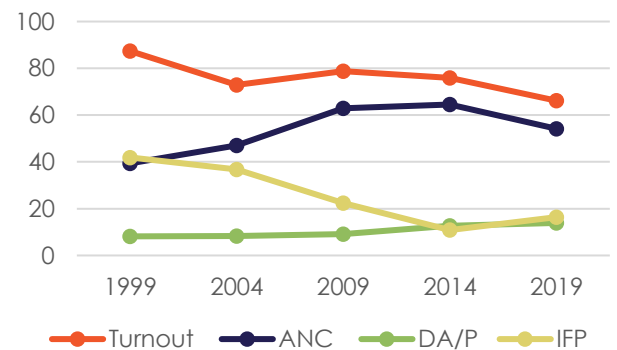
Source: IEC

Figure 5: Voter turnout vs party performance in GP – provincial elections (%)



Source: IEC

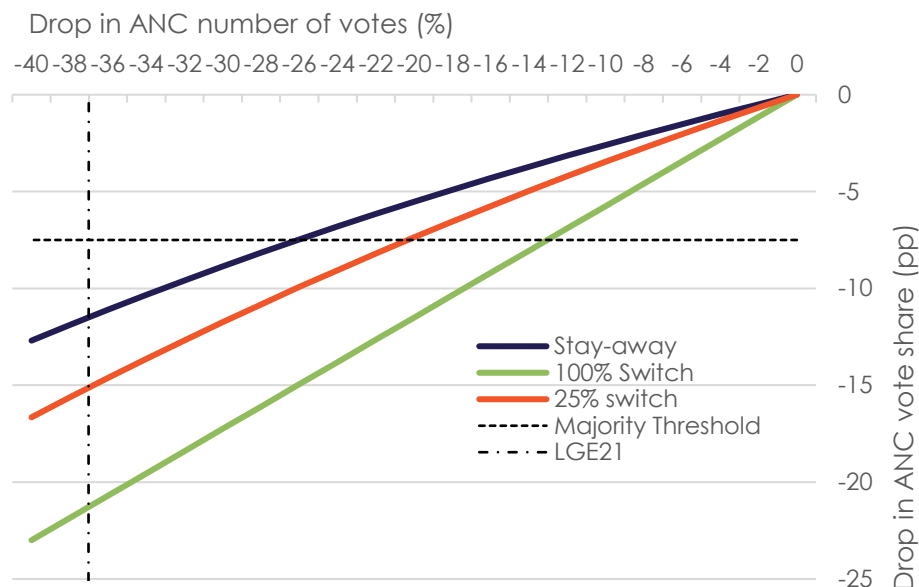
Figure 6: Voter turnout vs party performance in KZN – provincial elections (%)



Source: IEC

Voter turnout in two of the most populous provinces tends to mirror national trends.

Figure 7: ANC performance (decline) in relation to different turnout scenarios



Source: Krutham

The graph above highlights the potential decline of the ANC in relation to the number of votes it loses. Note the significant decline as ANC voters make a 100% switch. This implies that opposition parties must work hard to convince ANC voters to switch parties as opposed to staying away from the polls. Not voting will not have as significant an impact as switching to other parties will on the ANC's vote share. This is further proof of the need to ensure high voter turnout, at least from the opposition party perspective.

As can be seen in figure 4, the DA has historically improved as voter turnout has declined. This trend was disrupted by the 2019 elections in which the party's vote share decreased as turnout declined. In recent by-elections, a trend (although not yet solid) of the ANC declining as turnout improves has emerged. This points to a need for opposition parties to work extra hard to encourage voters to register and show up at voting stations.

A key task for stakeholders is getting young people (18 to 29 years) to register to vote. This group currently has a low voter registration rate and has in previous elections registered a low participation rate. That said we expect voter turnout to continue to decline. Given its budgetary constraints, we do not see the IEC managing to disrupt the decline in voter turnout. Parties are doing their part in encouraging voter registration. The DA has recently launched its voter registration campaign whereas the African Transformation Movement has been crisscrossing the country on the same mission. Rise Mzansi has also embarked on voter registration tours. The EFF and the IFP are on similar missions. Former DA member Mbali Ntuli's Ground Work Collective has also embarked on a voter registration campaign with some focus on the youth. The organisation has managed to make voter registration campaigning part of music "festivals". Hosting election day festivals in venues close to voting stations has been identified as helpful in increasing turnout on election day in the US.¹²

¹² Elizabeth Addonizio, James Glaser and Donald Green. 2007. "Putting the Party Back into Politics: An Experiment Testing Whether Election Day Festivals Increase Voter Turnout". *Political Science & Politics*, 40(4), 721-727, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1325270

Knocking out the vote

While we foresee turnout declining, we must mention that there is an opportunity for parties to invest heavily in encouraging voters to turnout at the “last minute”. That creation of excitement on election day or just a few days before the election can go a long way towards shaping outcomes. Due to its reach, the ANC stands a good chance of changing its expected trajectory at the last minute. The party has enough members on the ground to do door-to-door canvassing. Second in this regard is the EFF which has been able to register presence in different parts of the country in a short period of time. Moreover, the ANC and its members and leaders – some of whom work for government – have the resources including vehicles and the funds to knock out the vote.

The taxi industry is an important part of transporting voters to knock out the vote for parties. Different parties, including the ANC, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and the EFF have benefited from having members with ties to the industry. That said, parties with resources typically arrange transportation for potential voters. This is where smaller parties are disadvantaged. The DA is also in a position to knock out the vote mainly due to its access to funding. However, its limited reach – especially in rural areas – disadvantages it against the ANC and the EFF.

While not much attention is paid to smaller parties, some of them have the potential to drive higher turnout in different parts of the country. The IFP for instance has the capacity and reach to drive higher voter turnout in several rural parts of KZN. Centring its campaign on preserving the legacy of its late founder Mangosuthu Buthelezi who was held in high regard in many parts of the province may serve the IFP well in increasing voter turnout and likely support. In the Eastern Cape, the United Democratic Movement has only a very slim chance of driving voter turnout. In Gauteng, ActionSA is in a position to encourage voter turnout, but this will depend largely on its messaging. Its rhetoric against foreign nationals, which it has recently toned down, may ignite an interest in participating in elections. The Patriotic Alliance (PA) will drive turnout in predominantly coloured communities. While it may be an important player, the Super Pact of minority parties whose formation is pending will not play a significant role in driving turnout.

Table 3: Parties and their ability to knock out the vote

Party	Comment
ANC	Due to its reach and resources, the ANC has the advantage to knock out the vote
DA	The DA has the potential due to its resources (funding) but reach will be an issue for the party.
EFF	The EFF has enough reach to knock out the vote. Limited resources may be an issue but the party relies to a great extent on the ability of its members and leaders to mobilise resources at a local level
IFP	The IFP's reach is also very limited. The party thus only has a chance of knocking out the vote in rural KZN.
ActionSA	ActionSA has the potential to knockout the vote in Gauteng. However, the party will have to direct substantial resources towards this as reach may be an issue. The rhetoric will also have to be on par with voters' expectations.
PA	The PA may be able to knock out the vote in predominantly coloured areas.

Source: Krutham

Conclusion

In line with recent trends, we expect voter turnout to decline in the 2024 elections. While it is difficult to precisely capture the impact this will have on parties' vote share, recent by-election data points to a need for opposition parties to go all out to encourage voter registration and voter turnout on the day of the election. This is because the governing party has recently been performing poorly in by-elections with improved turnout rates. Furthermore, the only national election in which the ANC's performance improved (2004) coincided with a significant decline in voter turnout from 89% to 77%. Moreover, data shows that it is not enough for ANC voters to stay away from an election. In order for opposition parties to profit from dissatisfaction with the ANC government, ANC voters need to switch allegiance to them rather than stay away from the polls. This is why it is in the best interest of opposition parties to attempt to offset any factor that may result in low voter turnout. The day and date on which an election is held have minimal impact on turnout in the South African case because elections are usually held on a public holiday and at a time when extreme weather conditions such as rainfall or snowfall are unlikely to occur.

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