

Twenty years since our first democratic elections, significant advances have been made in gender representation in the electoral process at national, provincial and municipal level. But the quest for women's equality in our electoral democracy is far from over writes Chief Electoral Officer Mosotho Moepya

In April 1994, as millions of South Africans waited patiently and eagerly to cast their votes for a free and democratic government, women stood shoulder-to-shoulder with men in those snaking lines which have come to stand as symbols of the birth of democracy in our country.

While exact number of women voters are not known (as there was no voters' roll for that historic first poll), based on population trends and subsequent statistics it is safe to say that at least half and probably slightly more of those voters were women.

Yet the candidates they were electing were mostly men and when the count was over and new representatives had been sworn in to a new democratic Parliament, less than one third of its members were women.

In itself this was a giant leap forward in equality as under apartheid, women enjoyed less than 3% representation in Parliament.

Fast forward 20 years and once again from dusty township streets to shady tree-lined suburban pavements women and men stood shoulder-to-shoulder to cast their votes, this time in our country's fifth democratic elections.

And, as in every election since 1994, women voters were again in the majority. While women do outnumber men in South Africa (52% to 48% according to the latest Stats SA census figures), their representivity on the voters' roll is significantly higher: of the 25.39 million registered voters for 7 May election, 55% were women.

On top of higher registration levels, women are also much more likely to actually vote in an election. Turnout statistics for the May 2014 elections showed that turnout among female voters was substantially higher at 76% than that of male counterparts at just 70%.

South Africa is not alone in this phenomenon; similar trends are seen in many developed and developing countries. In the United States (US), the number of female voters has exceeded the number of male voters in every presidential election since 1964 (Center for American Women and Politics). And, according to International IDEA, a similar trend is evident in Britain, where the gender gap in turnout reversed in 1979 so that by the 1997 election an estimated 17.7 million women voted compared with around 15.8 million men.

So it is clear that women more than make up their fair share of participants in our electoral system from a voter perspective.

But what of progress in gender equity in candidacy lists and representation at the various levels of government?

It is pleasing to note that South Africa has also made huge strides in gender representation within its various spheres of government. South Africa's national and provincial legislatures are among the world's most representative in terms of gender. South Africa is currently the second highest in SADC and is in the world's top 10 countries for women in Parliament according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Source: www.ipu.org 1 July 2014)

Of the final 830 candidates sworn in as representatives of the national and provincial legislatures after this year's election approximately 42% were women, with the Limpopo legislature showing the highest proportion of women representatives at 47% and the lowest being 38% in the Western Cape legislature.

This is a far cry from pre-democracy levels and shows significant improvement from 1994 and 1999 when women accounted for just 26.76% of the candidates, and 2004 when 30.65% of the candidates were women.

But take a slightly closer look and there remains room for further improvement - including in the National Assembly where the gender ratio for South Africa's fifth parliament showed a slight slippage today over the previous Parliament (42% currently versus 45% after 2009 elections).

There is also considerable room for improvement at local government level where currently just 39.25% of municipal councillors are women, with even fewer being elected directly by the voters in ward contests (33%) compared to those elected via proportional representation via party lists (45%). With the local government elections in 2016 looming, there is ample opportunity to advance women's representation at municipal level.

There are those who advocate for a quota system which will compel parties to include 50% women candidates. But such a regulation removes the power from the hands of voters.

Ultimately, through sheer numbers on the voters' roll, women have the power to determine the outcome of elections in this and many countries. The women who today sit as Members of Parliament, Members of the National Council of Provinces, Members of provincial legislatures, and municipal councilors are at the forefront of this quest. They are the political descendants of Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Helen Suzman and many others like them who have carried the torch for gender equality in electoral democracy in South Africa.