



Election readiness and why voter addresses matter

By Sy Mamabolo, Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Commission of South Africa

The term of South Africa's fifth parliament will end on 6 May 2019, triggering a 90-day window during which fresh elections must be held to elect new members of the national and provincial legislatures.

These elections will be the sixth national and provincial elections since the dawn of our democracy and will mark the 25th anniversary of electoral democracy in our country.

Over the past quarter century South Africa's electoral democracy and political environment has evolved and changed. Political parties, civil society, the media and voters themselves expect ever-higher levels of transparency, efficiency and reliability in the electoral process.

Tolerance by all participants for minor imperfections in the process – even those with no material impact on the outcome - has rightly dissipated as elections become ever-more closely contested and the stakes get higher.

Such is the nature of evolution and development, and the Electoral Commission welcomes the ever-higher levels of proficiency and standards of excellence which are expected of us.

Since the establishment of the Electoral Commission in 1997 we have continued to learn, grow, develop and enhance the electoral system in our country. This is a never-ending process necessary to adjust to a rapidly changing world and to constantly raise the bar in line with our vision: to be a pre-eminent leader in electoral democracy.

For the past 18 months and more we have been hard at work in preparing to conduct next year's elections. These preparations will continue right up to the eve of the elections to ensure everything possible is in place to allow for peaceful, free, fair and credible elections.

In the not too distant future Parliament will consider the Electoral Laws Amendment Bill which contains key legislative amendments to further streamline and enhance the electoral process.

The voters' roll is a cornerstone of electoral integrity. Without faith and trust in it, the entire election process may be called into question. Importantly, the amendments seek to provide clarity regarding the process to be followed if and when registered voters do not have an address on the voters' roll.

It is for this reason that the Electoral Commission has over the past two-and-a-half years spent countless hours and substantial amount of money in seeking to implement the order of the Constitutional Court to obtain all addresses which were missing from the voters' roll.

With the incredible assistance of voters themselves, political parties, government departments, private and public entities, civil society and a host of other democracy-loving South Africans we have been able to dramatically improve the voters' roll during this time.

In March 2016 the voters' roll contained complete addresses for just 8.5 million registered voters out of a total of 24.9 million (34%). Today that figure stands at 21.3 million – or 82% of the total voters' roll. In terms of the original Constitutional Court judgment (which dealt only with addresses of voters who registered after December 2003), fewer than 1 million voters remain on the voters' roll without address details.

We are enormously grateful to every single person who assisted us in this endeavor.

However, these efforts notwithstanding, the Electoral Commission believes that the fate of those who remain without addresses cannot be left uncertain. Their right to vote should remain untrammelled and the integrity of the voters' roll must be secured prior to the elections.

That is why the Electoral Commission has undertaken four key steps:

- Firstly we are continuing to explore every opportunity to obtain accurate and up-to-date addresses for voters for whom an address is not currently on record. This includes sourcing address information from public and commercial sources and subjecting them to a rigorous quality assurance process which includes geo-coding to pinpoint them on a ward map. This process has become part of the day-to-day operations of the Electoral Commission and will continue to form a constant and core part of our work into the future.
- Secondly we have proposed legislation for consideration by Parliament to help restore and safeguard the integrity of the voters' roll in the future – including providing clarity on the rights of voters who may not have address details on record.

- Thirdly we are in the process of procuring new voter registration devices which will allow for accurate, real-time registration of voters including GPS-linked address verification to ensure voters are registered in the correct ward.
- Finally, we have approached the Constitutional Court to extend the grace period it granted us on the defective voters' roll to beyond next year's elections. We have done this to ensure the elections can go ahead with certainty and confidence in the voters' roll.

Voters who remain without addresses must continue to enjoy their right to vote and the mere presence of a missing address should not be grounds to invalidate the entire roll or to call into question the elections by a disgruntled party.

The extension of the period of suspension of the declaration of invalidity will also allow further opportunities to find the missing addresses. Experience has shown us that voters are most likely to visit a voting station shortly before or during an election. The registration weekend for next year's elections and Election Day itself provide the best opportunity of obtaining missing addresses from the voters themselves. We are proposing that they must provide an up-to-date address before they are allowed to vote.

This matter is now in the hands of the Constitutional Court and we await their wise judgment. No matter what the outcome we will continue to focus on preparing for the elections including updating addresses on the voters' roll to ensure that once again voters can come out in their great numbers to choose their future, secure in the knowledge that the elections are free, fair and credible.

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