

## **Getting young South Africans to vote is in all our interests**

Mosotho Moepya, Chief Electoral Officer

Nomsa Mazibuko\* has voted in two elections – in 2011 and in 2014. The 25-year-old from KwaZulu-Natal, who now studies in Pretoria and works part-time to make ends meet, said both times she voted “was for change”. Fellow student Itumeleng Molefe\* is 27 years old from Limpopo. She has never voted. “For what?” she shrugs, “Maybe I’ll vote next time.”

Both Nomsa and Itumeleng represent fairly common views among young people in South Africa about elections. According to research conducted recently on behalf of the Electoral Commission, the majority of young people who voted or plan to vote indicate that they are doing so to seek change to their circumstances.

Most cite increasing employment opportunities, better education, housing and local services as their primary motivators for voting.

These drivers are not surprising given that a recent study showed one third of persons between 15 and 19 live in households where no one is employed and employment levels among males of working age born since 1990 is estimated at 67% and females a whopping 75% (including discouraged workers).

It’s a stark scenario – and one which is likely to dominate the platforms of many parties in the run-up to next year’s local government election even though employment and education are primarily national rather than municipal issues.

The research also shows that the youth (18 – 25) are the least motivated of all age groups to vote in elections.

Those who say they won’t vote next year most commonly say that voting won’t make a difference or that they find few parties or candidates worth believing in. Perplexingly, they are also least likely to be influenced by fancy advertising campaigns.

If the young people of South Africa stand together, they have the numbers on their side to make a difference. A big difference! Nearly half of South Africa’s population of 53 million people were born after 1990.

The youth of South Africa have always played a leading role in agitating for change in our country’s history. The question that some commentators are now asking is not if but rather when the youth will find their coordinated and common voice...and how they will use it.

Fortunately the research shows that the majority of young people – like Nomsa - continue to view the future of South Africa with optimism and believe that voting is the best way to make their voice heard.

Encouragingly also, statistics from previous elections show that once registered, first-time voters tend to turnout to vote in higher percentages than older voters...and that once a voter always a voter. In last year’s elections, the turnout was highest among 18 – 19 year old voters at over 80%.

But less encouragingly, only about a third of all 18- and 19-year-olds who are eligible to vote are currently registered.

Our challenge is to get these young people to register as voters between now and next year's elections. And then to ensure they come out in large numbers to vote.

The credibility of elections is not only a factor of how well managed an election is. Credibility relies on how well the outcome reflects the will of the majority of people. If a significant portion of the potential electorate does not participate, this has a direct impact on the credibility of the outcome – and can only exacerbate feelings of alienation and disaffection by those who did not participate. It is a vicious cycle that should concern all of us who want to see democracy continue to thrive and flourish in South Africa.

That is why we must all work together – civil society, political parties, the media and all stakeholders - to ensure that young South Africans find their place and voice in our democratic processes building on the foundation laid by those generations which have come before.

*\*Not their real names*

*This article is written in Mr Moepya's personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the view of the Electoral Commission. It seeks to deal with the issue of the participation of young people in elections rather than being a view on youth politics.*