



SOUTH AFRICA

Electoral Commission Research Seminar:

**SAFEGUARDING ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE
OF GROWING MISTRUST**

**Holiday Inn, Sandton
Johannesburg**

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Commission Perspective on the Role and Importance of Research in the work of the Electoral Commission

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Commissioners,
CEO & DCEOS,
Senior Management and all PEOs,
Speakers, Presenters and Panelists,
All invited guests and participants, including those joining this Seminar virtually,

ALL PROTOCOL OBSERVED.

Introduction.

Elections are an important part of any democratic system of government, and competitive elections are even more central as a component of multi-party democracy. They are a mechanism through which citizens in democratic countries freely choose their preferred representatives from a variety of political parties and candidates to represent their interests in the process of government and decision making.

In highly competitive systems of choosing political leaders and representatives, and in some cases involving various levels of government, the need for ensuring

free and fair elections, organized and conducted in line with clear legislation and best practices in the world, is an absolute necessity. This makes it imperative that an impartial, competent and capable Election Management Body (EMB) is in place, with the necessary institutional capacity and resources to organize, manage and deliver credible, free and fair elections. The Electoral Commission of South Africa boasts such a track record.

The IEC is mandated to (a) manage elections of national, provincial and municipal legislative bodies in accordance with national legislation; (b) ensure that those elections are free and fair, and (c) declare the results of those elections within a period that must be prescribed by national legislation and that is as short as is reasonably possible.

Role and Important of Research

In discharging its constitutional and legislative mandate, the Commission places a great deal of emphasis on being well informed, by regularly utilizing available, or commissioning new scientific research, public opinion surveys and other types of research to gather data that is relevant to our work. The research data serve at least two important purposes. Firstly, to keep the Commission better informed about the views and needs of the voters who are central to the work that we do. The data informs the Commission about what the citizens think about the quality of our election management work, and how best to meet their needs in future elections.

Secondly, the findings and valuable knowledge generated through our research work helps the Commission inform its future electoral management planning, monitoring and evaluation processes. In this regard, research has come to assume an important role not only as a tool for generating knowledge about the views and

experiences of voters. It is also a tool for generating in-depth knowledge of sound democratic electoral processes and best practices for enhancing the Commission's electoral management planning, monitoring and evaluation processes. This becomes important as the IEC seeks to continually improve the quality of its election management work into the future. Through data gathered through scientifically rigorous research work, the IEC is also able to learn from comparable work carried out by other Election Management Bodies not only within the SADC region, but also continentally and globally.

In recognition of the increasing importance of research in its work, the Electoral Commission's 2018 Vision Electoral Excellence places emphasis on the research function's role of seeking to entrench the Commission as a pre-eminent leader in electoral democracy, through key research studies to inform and influence its work. Such research studies are expected to assist the Commission's leadership and operational staff in gaining a deeper and broader knowledge and understanding of issues impacting electoral democracy and the management of elections in South Africa.

Over the past two decades, as the country's political landscape has become highly competitive and complex, citizens and voters have become equally sophisticated and well-informed. The utilization of modern mass communication technologies by voters has increased exponentially. This has enabled citizens to gain access to diverse sources of information and knowledge about democracy, elections and voting, which are increasingly shaping the views and expectations of the citizens and voters about how democracy should serve their needs.

There is also greater awareness among, and increasing demands, from the voters and other key role-players about the importance of well managed electoral processes. Increased access to information technologies has allowed voters to

share knowledge and experiences, and learn from others not only within the country, but in other countries, which has sharpened their expectations and demands for credible, free, fair and legitimate elections. Therefore, maintaining the Commission's track record of managing and delivering free and fair elections calls for informed decision-making based on reliable scientific data.

In ensuring that scientific research is integral to the work of the Commission going forward, we have developed a five-year (2020-2025) research strategy as part of the Commission's long term Vision. The strategy comprises a combination of long standing and short term research studies, which allows the Commission to identify and pursue long-term research challenges, while retaining the flexibility to respond with research products that meet emerging short-term institutional needs based on rapidly changing dynamics in our electoral democracy.

IEC Research Products and Usage

As indicated already, the Commission's Research Strategy combines a set of long-term research studies and short-term ad-hoc studies. Our long term flagship studies and research products have been conducted since the mid-2000s, and continue even to this day, in collaboration with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC):

✓ *The Voter Participation Surveys (VPS):*

- These surveys have been conducted regularly since 2005
- They are conducted on a nationally-representative sample of members of the public, prior to every National and Provincial, and Municipal Government Elections.

- They provide the IEC with a broad overview of the country's socio-political environment ahead of National, Provincial and Municipal elections
- The surveys help to evaluate the behaviour of voters, their attitudes towards the country's democracy, political system, leadership and the performance of the government.
- The studies also measure levels of citizen interest in electoral participation prior to elections.

✓ *The Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS):*

- The ESS helps to determine the perceptions and attitudes of voters on election day, immediately after the voters had cast their ballots
- They are conducted in the wake of the National, Provincial & Municipal government elections.
- Their purpose is to gauge the extent to which the voters on Election Day displayed positive or negative evaluations about various aspects of electoral democracy and voting (i.e. voting procedures, the time it takes to vote, the competence of election staff, satisfaction with the work of the IEC, etc.)

Besides the long term research studies, we also regularly conduct short-term research studies, based on emerging and urgent institutional imperatives:

- ✓ These short-term/ad hoc studies are conducted based on emerging needs expressed by internal Departments/units of the IEC
- ✓ They focus on subjects and topics within the mandate of the IEC such as: electronic voting technology, ballot paper design, spoilt

ballot papers, party funding, bye-elections, impact of Covid-19 on voter turnout, etc.

We do not just conduct these studies for its own sake. We also actively learn from them and utilise the lessons to enhance all aspects of our election management work. We have utilised some of our studies in the past in a number of ways:

- ✓ To guide the work of the IEC in the formulation of policies and strategic decision making
- ✓ To assist the Commission in the planning and management of elections.
- ✓ To help us learn best practices in areas of our work such as voter education, voter registration and other activities we conduct in-between elections.
- ✓ The research reports and publication are also made available to the public to contribute to ongoing public debates on matters impacting on the country's electoral democracy

Today's seminar was born out of the need for the IEC leadership and staff, working closely with the HSRC, to review and take stock of the considerable amount of research work we have conducted over the past decade or so, and to learn from the findings contained in available research on electoral democracy conducted by the IEC and other institutions and scholars.

It is common knowledge that in every democratic country, electoral attitudes, patterns of voting behaviour and the experiences of voters evolve and change over time, thus shaping the nature of electoral democracy in a dynamic way. South Africa is no exception in this regard. For instance, in the latest 2021 ESS report, the study points out that one of the key emerging trends in our electoral

democracy is the increasing voter disaffection and disengagement from electoral democracy. This trend has been accompanied by a significant loss of trust among voters towards core democratic and political institutions in the country.

We are very keen not only to learn and understand these long enduring trends in the behaviour, preferences and attitudes of citizens and voters, as well as the way they evaluate our democracy and how it functions. We also seek to understand some of the key underlying factors that account for these trends in voter behaviour, attitudes and preferences in the long term, and how to respond to these trends in order to strengthen electoral democracy in South Africa.

Conclusion

We have convened this Seminar, and invited the HSRC and a number of respected scholars and practitioners in the field of electoral democracy to join us. We want this seminar to serve as a platform to reflect on the quality of our electoral democracy and how it has evolved over the past decade or more. We hope that these scholars will share their findings, analysis and perspectives based on the scientific research work they have conducted over the years.

I would therefore like to conclude by welcoming all of you on behalf of the Commission, and express the hope that we will all engage vigorously with our speakers, presenters and panellists on what they will be presenting and sharing with us today. At the end of this seminar, all of us gathered here should leave better informed and better armed with the knowledge and lessons about our electoral democracy, grounded in scientific research evidence.

Thank you