



Speech by the Chairperson of the Electoral Commission at the Symposium on Political Funding in South Africa

18 June 2025

Opening and Welcome Address

Salutations and Introduction

Honourable Members of Parliament, Leaders and representatives of political parties, organised representatives of business and donors, members of civil society organisations, the media, all electoral stakeholders in your different capacities present here, colleagues, esteemed ladies and gentlemen. At the outset, let me welcome you and thank you for accepting our invitation and investing your valuable time in the work we have scheduled for the next two days. It is work that has neither precedence nor equal. It will require us to harness our collaborative efforts for the common good.

As we will soon discover, the work provides the building blocks upon which a solid foundation may be built. For this reason, this occasion marks a pivotal moment in the ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic governance and electoral integrity. Four years ago, the nation introduced significant legislation concerning political funding. This legislative measure represented a deliberate and bold commitment to enhancing the transparency, fairness, and accountability of the electoral processes.

The report we are about to receive has engaged with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, forming the bedrock of this evaluation. This multi-stakeholder engagement is not merely a procedural step; it is fundamental to the credibility and legitimacy of the review's outcomes.

This collaborative approach underscores a fundamental commitment to inclusive governance, where the health and integrity of the democratic process are recognised

as a shared responsibility. The Foundational Pillars of Political Finance Regulation: Why It Matters

At its core, political finance regulation is designed to safeguard the very essence of the democratic process. Its universally recognised objectives are to foster transparency, ensure accountability, promote fairness, and protect democratic integrity from undue influence and corruption.

A functional democracy requires funding for parties and campaigns, but this very funding, if not properly managed, can paradoxically become a force that erodes democratic principles. Regulation, therefore, is not about eliminating money from politics, but rather about managing this inherent tension to maximise its utility in enabling political activity while minimising its destructive potential through corruption and undue influence.

Transparency, in this context, is far more than a bureaucratic requirement; it serves as a powerful, multi-faceted mechanism for deterrence and empowerment. By requiring the disclosure of funding sources and detailing how funds are spent, the public is empowered to make informed decisions about candidates and parties.

Transparent financial data enhances public trust in government institutions and reduces the influence of wealthy interests in disproportionately shaping electoral outcomes, thereby strengthening the public's confidence that every vote carries equal weight.

Equally vital is the principle of a level playing field. Regulatory tools such as limits on donations, restrictions on campaign spending, and public funding mechanisms are specifically designed to ensure that electoral contests are fair and competitive.

These provisions aim to provide genuine equality of opportunity for all participants, preventing financial disparities from becoming insurmountable barriers to political participation.

Finally, accountability forms the bedrock upon which all these principles rest. The efficacy of any regulatory framework is directly tied to its enforcement. As the oversight body, the Electoral Commission's role, and indeed the collective responsibility of all stakeholders, is critical in ensuring that these regulations are not merely theoretical constructs on paper but are rigorously and impartially applied in practice.

Global Perspectives: Navigating Successes and Failures in Established Democracies

Any contemporary review of political funding must not only assess the application of the law to traditional forms of finance but also proactively consider how it addresses (or fails to address) the complexities of digital campaigning, online advertising, and the role of influencers. This requires forward-thinking legislative and enforcement mechanisms. Crucially, weak enforcement, a lack of independence, insufficient resources, and poor interagency cooperation among oversight bodies often render even well-designed laws ineffective, fostering a culture of impunity.

Charting the Path Forward: Towards Adaptive and Accountable Governance

The research outcomes presented today are not merely academic exercises; they are critical tools for shaping the collective future of democratic governance. They provide an evidence-based foundation to understand the successes of existing legislation, identify gaps and vulnerabilities, and contextualise national experiences within broader global and continental trends. The objective is to move beyond mere compliance to achieve genuine effectiveness in political finance regulation. This requires a continuous adaptation of regulatory frameworks, ensuring they remain robust in the face of evolving challenges, particularly the complexities introduced by the digital age and the persistent threat of illicit financial flows.

Lived experiences suggest that political finance regulation is not a one-time legislative act but an ongoing, dynamic process. Effective governance in this domain requires an adaptive approach, continuously learning from implementation challenges, technological shifts, and the ingenuity of those seeking to circumvent rules. This necessitates constant review, refinement, and robust, evolving enforcement mechanisms.

The success of political funding legislation hinges on more than just the law itself. It demands robust enforcement, which in turn requires independent and well-resourced oversight bodies, free from political interference.

In jurisdictions where political regulation appears to be working, enhanced interagency cooperation, bringing together electoral commissions, anti-corruption agencies, financial intelligence units, and law enforcement bodies, seems to be paramount.

Most importantly, it requires the sustained commitment and collaboration of all stakeholders. Political parties must demonstrate a clear commitment to complying with regulations. Donors must embrace transparency. Civil society must continue to play a vital role in monitoring and advocacy. Moreover, the Electoral Commission must remain steadfast in its mandate to ensure fairness, accountability, and integrity.

Concluding Remarks: A Shared Vision for Democratic Strength

A comprehensive review of political funding legislation, drawing on both national experience and international trends, underscores the complex yet critical nature of this domain for the health of democracy.

This requires not only well-crafted legislation but also robust, independent, and well-resourced enforcement mechanisms, coupled with sustained political will and genuine multi-stakeholder collaboration. By leveraging the insights gained from this review, the nation can refine its political funding legislation, ensuring it continues to serve as a beacon of transparency, accountability, and fairness.

This collective endeavour will undoubtedly strengthen the nation's democratic fabric and contribute significantly to the broader progress of the Southern African region.