Research article

Demographic and Systemic Factors Affecting Student Voter Turnout in Africa's Largest Distance Higher Education Institution

Tshegofatso Mogaladi* & Motlatso Mlambo**

Abstract

Public higher education institutions in South Africa conduct Student Representative Council (SRC) elections yearly. However, there is a paucity of studies to determine factors that affect voter turnout in these elections. This descriptive quantitative study conducted an empirical analysis of factors influencing students' voter participation at Africa's largest Open Distance eLearning institution. An electronic survey instrument was distributed among the sampled students and yielded a final response count of 6,851. A joint descriptive statistical analysis and binary logistic regression model were applied to analyse the data. Regression analysis revealed that there was a significant relationship between students having encountered one or more of a number of marketing initiatives employed in relation to the elections and voter participation. This positions marketing as a significant predictor of student voting given that respondents who encountered SRC election marketing initiatives were seven times more likely to vote, as shown by the odds ratio (OR=7.9 [95% CI:6.6-9.3], p=0.001). The second-highest predictor of voting in this study was the impact of the closing date for voting. Student respondents who indicated that the voting period was long enough were two times more likely to vote compared with those who did not believe it was long enough (OR=2.2 [95% CI: 1.9-2.7], p-value <0.001). Other significant predictors of SRC voting included gender, employment status and level of qualification. Whereas the study revealed a fair balance between the influence of demographic and systemic factors on SRC electoral process, institutions need to pay close attention to systemic factors, which have great potential to constrain voter participation.

Keywords

elections, voting, voter participation, student governance, higher education institutions

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Introduction

According to Lewis and Rice (2005), there is high quality research being conducted on national elections in the United States (US), although numerous other elections held in that country are less researched and reported on. Similarly, in South Africa, there is a paucity of research on elections beyond those conducted for positions in government, for example, in relation to positions in business associations; boards; the labour movement; student governance structures; and many other societal organs. Studies on elections in South Africa predominately focus on national and provincial (general) elections, as well as local government (municipal) elections. Other forms of election remain relatively unexplored. This could be attributed to the societal perception of general elections as the main conduit for conveying demands and aspirations related to service delivery (Paret, 2016). However, elections of representatives to bodies such as Student Representative Councils (SRCs) and other organisational elections need to receive greater research attention, in part because such studies may reveal some of the reasons for participation and non-participation in elections in general, including in local government elections which have suffered from declining voter participation, especially among the youth, in South Africa.

Hahn (1998) provided an insightful analysis on the importance of SRCs and the purpose they serve in fostering engagement in society and communities. For example, SRCs can provide a platform for nurturing leadership capabilities, as well as exposing students to the nature and role of elections as mechanisms for decision-making in society. In this way, SRCs and SRC elections play an important role in developing future active citizens. The societal benefits accruing from SRC elections and involvement in student governance activities have been elucidated and corroborated by other researchers (Print et al., 2002; Print, 2007; Saha & Print, 2010). These researchers note that voting and participating in student governance activities raises consciousness among students and is a predictor of their involvement in political activities in the future by imparting indelible lessons in democracy. Voting and participating in student governance activities is also indicative of students' preparedness to vote later in life as well as their propensity to advocate for peaceful social activism.

Mattes and Richmond (2015) suggest that South Africa is contending with youth voter apathy which manifests in the form of low participation rates in local, provincial and national parliamentary elections among young people. South Africa's youth were relatively unlikely to identify with any political party and a relatively high number indicated that they had not voted in recent elections although they reported following the election campaigns of political parties quite closely (Mattes & Richmond, 2015). Meanwhile, Statistics South Africa (2021) reports that a significant percentage (23%) of youth within the 18–35 age group is enrolled in public higher education institutions. In this context, an investigation into voting behaviour in respect of SRC elections might help to explain this cohort's inclination, or lack thereof, to participate in general elections.

The current study offers an empirical assessment of how factors such as field of study; access to information communication technologies (ICTs); employment status;

and student age and gender, influenced voter turnout in the recent SRC elections at the University of South Africa (UNISA) – an open distance e-learning institution of higher learning which states on its website that it boasts 350,000 enrolled students and therefore accounts for one-third of students enrolled in formal public higher education in the country.[1]

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

This study is underpinned by three theories: social systems theory; structural conduct performance theory; and participative leadership theory. Social systems theory, which was coined by a biologist named Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1940s, contends that organisations and societies comprise multiple systems which, while performing distinct roles, work iteratively to advance organisational and social missions (Wambui, 2015). Accordingly, universities are systems consisting of numerous units or sub-systems that work collaboratively for the attainment of their broader goals. SRCs are one of the important units within universities. The Higher Education Act 101 of 1995 mandated that SRCs be established at higher education institutions on an electoral basis to represent students and as an essential aspect of institutional co-operative governance. Although the management of universities in terms of institutional policies and statutes is firmly a responsibility of appointed senior executive managers, the voice of students, as championed by the SRC, is taken into account in decision-making.

In his seminal work, Bain (1951) argued that the conduct of an industry is informed by its structure. In this context, the higher education landscape in South Africa encompasses private and public institutions with different operational models. The focus of the current study is on the largest higher education institution in the country, which adopts a distance and electronic model for the delivery of its educational programme. Given its character, UNISA would be expected to elect and constitute its SRC in a manner distinctly different from that adopted at contact institutions. Similarly, the election of SRCs at UNISA is necessarily shaped by a diverse range of operational and systemic factors that reflect the distinct structure of UNISA as an institution.

The theory of participative leadership assumes that participation improves institutional effectiveness; affirms democratic principles; and makes leadership available for legitimate stakeholders (Leithwood et al., 1999). In the context of this study, it is argued that participation in the SRC elections by students has a long-term benefit for society as it increases students' consciousness and gears them to become responsible citizens who can contribute to the country's political and socio-economic system. In this regard, a determination of the factors that impact on the participation of students in SRC elections may support efforts to improve individual perceptions of elections in general, particularly among the youth.

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1 See https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default#:~:text=Unisa%20at%20a%20glance&text=We%20enrol%20nearly%20one%2Dthird%20of%20South%20African%20students.

Previous research (Wolfinger & Wolfinger, 2008; Milligan et al., 2003; Berinsky et al., 2001) demonstrated how various factors influence voter turnout. In their study, Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2008) considered how registered voters' decision to vote or not to vote related to social attributes which numerous other researchers had considered to be predictors of voter turnout, namely, age; education; and residential mobility. Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2008) added four more variables to this list: family income; race; sex; and employment status. Married people with and without children recorded the highest turnout rates in comparison with those whose marriages had been ended by death, separation or divorce, who were found to have a lower inclination to participate in elections. Those who were never married yielded the lowest turnout. Among married couples, a more politically perceptive spouse was more likely to inspire a less politically informed partner to vote (Harder & Krosnick, 2008). Meanwhile, in relation to divorced or separated couples, earlier research (Sandell & Plutzer, 2005) found increased voter participation among whites compared with other races.

People with little or no education and living in low-income households tend to record a low voter turnout (Wolfinger & Wolfinger, 2008). Milligan et al. (2003) found a robust relationship between education and voter participation in the US but not in the United Kingdom (UK). People with higher educational attainment possess skills and enhanced ability to navigate often-cumbersome election-registration processes (Harder & Krosnick, 2008). In addition, the more education one attains the greater the inclination to take interest in civic activities in comparison with people with less education (Harder & Krosnick, 2008).

Studies have shown that higher-education graduates in the social sciences tend to be more involved in civic activities and tend to vote more than graduates in other fields of study (Nie & Hillygus, 2001; Hillygus, 2005). In this regard, it was anticipated that the present research would establish whether there was variation across discipline of study in relation to turnout for SRC elections at a South African university.

A Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) survey on South African voter participation in elections conducted in 2005 revealed that interest in participating in the elections was lowest among those who had matriculated and higher among those with no schooling. This finding contradicts Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2008), who found that the more highly educated took voting more seriously than their less-educated peers.

Leighley and Nagler (1984) found that income significantly impacts voter turnout. In this context, Harder and Krosnick (2008) investigated whether the greater propensity to vote among wealthier people and earners was a question of motivation or of ability, or of both. In the context of the present study, this leads to the question: Did income levels significantly influence turnout for the SRC elections? The result may provide clarification on the economic status of participants in SRC elections.

Berinsky et al. (2001) found that voter turnout hinges on, among other factors, the amount of time that eligible people are willing to spare to cast their vote. People are generally preoccupied with many personal and private obligations which they are expected to forego on a voluntary basis and opt instead to queue to vote. In other words,

there is an opportunity cost entailing a choice between participating in the election, on one hand, and optimizing one's available time to meet private personal obligations and commitments, on the other. Ryabchuk (2017) concluded that widespread abstinence from participating in South Africa's 2014 elections was partly caused by logistical obstacles which included an inability to travel from home to the voting stations.

Casting a vote is a culmination of numerous electoral activities such as following candidate's campaigns; attending rallies and debates in some instance; and registering as a voter. Although the financial costs to the voter of participating in these activities may not be that evident, they cannot be ruled out as a factor in determining levels of participation. McMurray (2010) argues that high-income earners who are older and educated have the luxury of participating in political activities, although the opportunity cost of such an engagement is higher for this group than it is for older people living in a lower income base.

Efforts to eliminate the opportunity cost of participating in elections may lead to increased voter turnout. Accordingly, ICT mechanisms to enable online voting have been introduced for many elections. The introduction of such mechanisms may be viewed as a necessity in the context of the fourth industrial revolution, and also as an answer to widespread voter dissatisfaction about the opportunity cost of participating in elections. For example, HSRC (2005) found that 49% of respondents in Mpumalanga province were quite dissatisfied with the amount of time they had to spend in the queues to cast their votes. Berinsky et al. (2001) posit that whereas voting by email is not necessarily effective in attracting the participation of non-traditional voters, it is effective in retaining active existing voters and therefore contributes to voter turnout.

Against the backdrop of this finding, there would be value in exploring whether the benefits of an enhanced online ICT electoral system that went beyond voting by email would extend to more than merely ensuring the retention of existing voters, as Berinsky et al. (2001) found, and could include encouraging non-traditional voters to take an active interest in the elections.

In this context, institutions of higher learning may be seen as places where new forms of voting could be deployed to test their potential effectiveness if they were to be rolled out more widely across society. Accordingly, there is clear value in assessing the nature of student uptake of the ICT-enhanced online voting system adopted for the SRC elections at UNISA, as well as the factors which shaped student access to this system.

Age has been found to be a significant demographic factor shaping voter turnout across the United States during presidential elections (Leighley & Nagler, 1984). In South Africa, turnout at general elections among 25–34-year-olds rose by a mere 11% from 1999 to 2004 and declined by 1% among people between 55 and 64 years of age (HSRC, 2005). Meanwhile, those between 18 and 44 years of age expressed a lack of interest in voting at forthcoming elections (HSRC, 2005). The influence of age on voter turnout in the context of SRC elections in South Africa is unexplored. In this regard, a key question is whether participation is higher among the first-time registered voters who are typically young (between 18 and 20 years of age) and then diminishes as the

student becomes older and more socialised into the university's system, and thus sees less value in the role of the SRC.

Harder and Krosnick (2008) argue that people with greater political efficacy are generally expected by society to cast a vote; although this argument is, to an extent, countered by Mattes and Richmond (2015) who found that South African youth, despite following the campaigns of various political parties, did not translate their political awareness into participation in recent elections. Saha and Print (2010) posit that, given the significant role played by student governance structures in contributing to an individual's comprehension of democracy and the nature of their future political engagement, involvement in these structures should not be viewed in isolation from other kinds of academic engagement, as if it were a form of extracurricular activity. Accordingly, there is a need to debunk what has become a dominant narrative: that, in some way, SRC activities should be considered "non-curricular". In this context, the compulsion to draw a disconnect between student activism and the purported core business of institutions of higher learning – that is, teaching, research and community engagement by academics and those in authority – may be countered by studying factors associated with student elections.

Data and Methodology

This study explored factors that influenced voter turnout during SRC elections at the University of South Africa. A survey was administered among selected South African students who were eligible to participate in the 2018 SRC elections in accordance with a university policy limiting participation to students who are registered for formal qualifications. Such qualifications include higher certificates, diplomas, and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

Data set

Qualtrics software was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. In administering the survey, a Qualtrics-generated link was sent to 10,000 randomly selected South African students who were eligible to participate in the 2018 SRC elections at the University of South Africa. Each province's representation in the sample was determined on the basis of its number of students proportionate to the university's total student headcount at the time of the elections. For example, given that students residing in Gauteng province constituted 42.2% of the total UNISA student headcount in 2018, according to the university's Higher Education Data Analyser (HEDA), 42% of the 10,000 sample comprised students who resided in Gauteng. The same principle was followed for the other provinces, that is North West (NW), Limpopo (L), Mpumalanga (MP), Northern Cape (NC), KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), Eastern Cape (EC), Western Cape (WC) and Free State (FS). The composition of the complete sample by province is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sample construction by province

	GP	NW	L	MP	NC
Head count	157,166	19,447	28,929	22,443	4,129
Head count %	42.2	5.2	7.8	6.0	1.1
Sample selection	4,300	500	700	600	100
	KZN	**EC**	**WC**	**FS**	**Grand Total**
Head count	85,075	17,334	29,497	8,195	372,215★
Head count %	22.9	4.7	7.9	2.2	100
Sample selection	2400	400	700	300	10,000

★ *Excluded from the total number of eligible students were all the students residing outside South Africa (9,153), who could not be attached to any province.*

Method and variables

Whether or not the particular surveyed student voted during the 2018 SRC election was used as the determinant of turnout and constituted a dependent variable. Students who did not vote were assigned a zero (0) and those who voted were coded one (1), making this a dichotomous variable. As in previous research (Leighley & Nagler, 1992; Lewis & Rice, 2005; Saha & Print, 2010), the influence of a number of demographic and systemic factors on voter turnout were considered. Regarding demographic factors, the influence of age; education by broad discipline; household income; and gender were considered in relation to turnout. The impact of the individual student's adaptability to electronic voting and access to ICT infrastructure, as well as the closing date of voting, and access to election marketing and campaign debates were included in the model for the present study as control variables. Student age was categorised under two codes, with zero "0" representing the youth, that is those aged 35 and under, and one "1" for students who were over 35 years of age but under the pensionable or retirement age of 60.

UNISA has nine faculties referred to as colleges. For the purposes of this study, the college of graduate studies and the business school were excluded. So, only students at the seven colleges offering both graduate and undergraduate programmes were surveyed, so that the comprehensive diversity of UNISA's Programme Qualification Mix could be represented. The chosen colleges were grouped into two broad categories for the purposes of this study: technical and non-technical. Accordingly, the colleges offering the most technical qualifications (College of Science and Engineering; College of Agriculture; College of Accounting; and College of Economics and Management Sciences) were clustered together and assigned a code of zero "0". The other colleges (College of Human Sciences; College of Education and College of Law) were regarded as human and social science disciplines and non-technical, and were coded one "1".

A student who was unemployed was coded zero "0" and a student who was employed was assigned a code of one "1". In relation to income, a code of zero "0" was assigned to students who earned an income, or lived in a household with an income equivalent to less than the ZAR 350,000 threshold set by the National Student Financial

Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to determine eligibility for receiving a state study grant. A code of one "1" was assigned to students who earned an income or lived in a household with an income above the NSFAS threshold and the band qualifying for a gap grant – in other words, above ZAR 600,000. A code of two "2" was allocated to those students whose household income was more than the threshold but fell within the band that qualifies for a gap grant – that is, from ZAR 350,000 to ZAR 600,000.

Regarding gender, female students were coded zero "0" and male students one "1".

In relation to access to ICT, students who had no access were coded zero "0"; students who used their own data or cell phone to cast a vote were coded one "1"; the students who used their employer's or UNISA's Wi-Fi or network facilities were coded two "2".

Voting during the SRC elections was opened for two weeks. Students who found the period too short were coded zero "0". Those students who found it sufficient were coded one "1". The SRC elections were marketed through various media. A code of zero "0" was assigned to students who did not see any of the marketing and promotional materials. Students who saw an actual SRC elections poster were assigned a code of one "1"; those who read an online publication about elections were assigned a code of two "2"; and students who encountered printed t-shirts, branded caps, and other promotional paraphernalia were coded three "3". Students who attended one of the student debates that were arranged by the election commission across many regions before the elections were coded one "1". Those who did not attend the debates were coded zero "0".

The model

To model the demographic and systematic factors influencing the student voter turnout in SRC elections a logistic regression by Field (2009) was employed:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times_{1i} + \varepsilon_i \tag{1}$$

where Y_i represents an observed turnout outcome, for example, whether or not the respondent voted in the last SRC elections; β_1 is a vector of estimable parameters (coefficients) of $\times_{1i}$, which is a vector of explanatory variables (independent variables); and ε_i is the error term. Turnout in SRC elections is influenced by a number of factors which are quantified to serve as the explanatory variables. Therefore, the model in equation 1 is reconstructed to set dependent variables as well as all identified independent variables within a multiple regression:

$$\begin{aligned} Vot_i = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1 age + \beta_2 edu + \beta_3 inc + \beta_4 gen + \beta_5 ict + \\ & \beta_6 cdat + \beta_7 adv + \beta_8 deb + \beta_9 emp + \varepsilon_i \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Where Vot_i is whether or not student *i'th* voted during the recent SRC elections, *age* is a predetermined age group to which the student belongs; *edu* is the field of study in which

the student is enrolled; *inc* is the student level of income; *gen* is the student's gender; *ict* the manner in which a student accesses ICT infrastructure; *cdat* the extent to which a student perceives the impact of the closing date on their decision about whether or not to vote; *adv* is the depth of the advertisement mechanisms employed during the elections; *deb* is the student's awareness of election debates; and *emp* is the student's employment status. All in all, there were nine independent variables that may be considered linearly related to voter turnout.

Survey respondents

In adherence to the ethical requirements of this study, respondents gave consent to participate in the survey before responding. The electronic survey had an opening phrase requiring consent for participation. Only participants who read and accepted the terms of the opening phrase, thus granting consent, were eligible to participate.

Table 2: Consent participation

Consent to participate	N	Percentage (%)
Yes	6,851	97.4
No	181	2.6
Total	**7,032**	**100**

As can be seen from Table 2 above, a total of 7,032 students opened the survey link. Only 181 (2.6%) declined to participate. Accordingly, the analysis of the survey results is based on the total 6,851 (97.4%) respondents who agreed to participate.

Results

Characteristics of voters and non-voters in the SRC elections

Table 3 shows that among those aged 31 to 35 years a relatively high proportion (52%) voted. While almost half (49.7%) of those aged 22 to 25-year-olds voted, which was the second highest proportion. At the other end of the scale, 53.3% of those aged 40 and above did not vote. All of which indicates that the younger students under the age of 35 years were more likely to participate than those older than 35 years, particularly if they were aged 40 years or above.

Table 3: Characteristics of SRC election voters and non-voters

Variables	Not voted		Voted		p-value
	N	%	N	%	
Age					
18–21 years	90	51.1	86	48.9	.460
22–25 years	417	50.3	412	49.7	
26–30 years	555	51.3	527	48.7	
31–35 years	375	48.0	407	52.0	
36–40 years	276	51.9	256	48.1	
40 and above	367	53.3	322	46.7	
Gender					
Male	739	42.9	983	57.1	<0.001
Female	1,337	56.8	1,018	43.2	
Other	4	30.8	9	69.2	
Employment status					
Unemployed	1,032	47.1%	1,159	52.9%	<0.001
Employed - part time	136	49.1%	141	50.9%	
Employed - full time	789	55.8%	626	44.2%	
Self-employed	86	67.2%	42	32.8%	
Retired	3	33.3%	6	66.7%	
Other (specify)	34	48.6%	36	51.4%	
Annual income					
ZAR 10,000 – 350,000	1,521	51.4%	1,437	48.6%	0.203
ZAR 351,000 – 600,000	190	55.4%	153	44.6%	
ZAR 601,000 and more	104	47.9%	113	52.1%	
Qualification					
Certificate	179	53.1%	158	46.9%	0.187
Undergraduate degree	1,538	51.1%	1,472	48.9%	
Honours degree	115	45.6%	137	54.4%	
Master's degree	45	42.1%	62	57.9%	
Doctorate	32	56.1%	25	43.9%	
Other (specify)	107	54.6%	89	45.4%	
Postgraduate below master's	64	48.9%	67	51.1%	
Election debate awareness					
Yes	50	10.8%	412	89.2%	<0.001
No	1,883	56.8%	1,431	43.2%	
Did not know	147	47.4%	163	52.6%	

Variables	Not voted		Voted		p-value
	N	%	N	%	
Timing					
Voting period was short	1,006	62.6	600	37.4	<0.001
Voting period was long enough	900	39.4	1,384	60.6	
Marketing of SRC elections					
I did not see any of the SRC election advertising and marketing	1,529	76.6%	466	23.4%	<0.001
I did encounter a poster promoting the SRC elections	121	21.5%	442	78.5%	
I did read an online publication on the SRC elections	341	28.3%	864	71.7%	
I did encounter a printed t-shirt, branded cap or other SRC election material	23	11.3%	181	88.7%	
Other (specify)	34	68.0%	16	32.0%	
Email	3	37.5%	5	62.5%	
MyUnisa	2	33.3%	4	66.7%	
SMS	3	60.0%	2	40.0%	
Word of mouth	2	28.6%	5	71.4%	
WhatsApp	1	100.0%	0	0.0%	
Facebook	0	0.0%	2	100.0%	
P<0.05, P<0.01** and P<0.001****					

Binary logistic regression model on predictors of SRC voter turnout

Table 4 below shows the binary logistic regression model on the predictors of SRC voting. The assessment was conducted at a confidence level of 95%. A positive coefficient implies that the explanatory variable positively impacted the dependent variable, whereas a negative coefficient would imply that the explanatory or independent variable impacted the dependent variable negatively. Although there was a positive coefficient among the 31–35-year-olds (b=0.06, SE=0.243) and the 36–40-year-olds (b=0.091, SE=0.257), age was not a significant predictor of SRC voting. Whereas gender reflected a negative coefficient (b= -0.713, SE=0.091), it was a highly significant predictor of voting, with females showing less chances of voting (OR=0.4 [95% CI: 0.4-.0.6], p=0.001) compared with males. Additionally, although being employed full-time and/or self-employed was a highly significant predictor of SRC voting, the chances of these groups voting were below the odds of 1, (OR=0.6 [95% CI:0.5-0.7], p=0.001) and (OR=0.3 [95% CI: 0.2-0.5], p=0.001) respectively. Retired respondents had a positive coefficient (b=0.904, SE=0.922) and the odds of them voting in the SRC elections were higher (OR=2.5 [95% CI: 0.4-15.0], p=0.327). However, this was a non-significant

predictor of SRC voting. A positive coefficient was noted among the respondents with a relatively high salary of ZAR 601,000 and more (b=0.258, SE=0.193). However, this was not a significant predictor for SRC voting. Therefore, income was found to be an insignificant predictor of SRC voting.

Table 4: Binary logistic regression model on predictors of SRC voting

	B	SE	p-value	Exp (B)	95% CI for exp (B)	
					Lower	Upper
Age (years)						
18–21				1		
22–25	-0.105	0.24	0.661	0.9	0.563	1.44
26–30	-0.088	0.236	0.71	0.916	0.577	1.454
31–35	0.06	0.243	0.806	1.062	0.659	1.711
36–40	0.091	0.257	0.724	1.095	0.662	1.81
40 and above	-0.221	0.255	0.385	0.802	0.487	1.321
Gender						
Male				1		
Female	-0.713	0.091	<0.001	0.49	0.41	0.585
Other (specify)	0.583	0.879	0.507	1.792	0.32	10.042
Employment						
Unemployed				1		
Employed – part-time	-0.264	0.171	0.122	0.768	0.55	1.073
Employed – full-time	-0.495	0.113	<0.001	0.609	0.488	0.76
Self-employed	-1.187	0.259	<0.001	0.305	0.184	0.506
Retired	0.904	0.922	0.327	2.471	0.406	15.049
Other (specify)	-0.451	0.346	0.192	0.637	0.324	1.254
Annual income						
ZAR 10,000 – 350,000				1		
ZAR 351,000 – 600,000	-0.105	0.158	0.509	0.901	0.66	1.229
ZAR 601,000 and more	0.258	0.193	0.182	1.295	0.886	1.892
Qualification						
Certificate				1		
Undergraduate degree	0.219	0.17	0.197	1.245	0.892	1.738
Honours degree	0.518	0.237	0.029	1.679	1.054	2.674
Master's degree	0.689	0.312	0.027	1.991	1.081	3.668
Doctorate	0.178	0.397	0.653	1.195	0.549	2.603
Other (specify)	-0.184	0.257	0.476	0.832	0.503	1.378
Postgraduate below master's	0.22	0.281	0.432	1.246	0.719	2.16

	B	SE	p-value	Exp (B)	95% CI for exp (B)	
Election debate awareness						
Yes				1		
No	-2.052	0.2	<0.001	0.128	0.087	0.19
Did not know	-1.551	0.246	<0.001	0.212	0.131	0.343
Closing date impact on voting						
Voting period long enough	0.803	0.09	<0.001	2.232	1.872	2.662
Marketing						
Seen marketing	2.065	0.088	<0.001	7.889	6.644	9.367

Qualification has a positive coefficient and is a significant predictor of voting among the respondents with honours degrees (b=0.518, SE=0.237) and master's degrees (b=0.689, SE=0.312) with odds of more than 1, (OR= 1.7 [95% CI: 1.0-2.7], p=0.029) and (OR=1.10 [95% CI:1.1-3.7], p=0.027) respectively. In relation to awareness of election debates, respondents who were not aware of the debates recorded a significantly higher negative coefficient (b=-2.052, SE=0.2), suggesting that students who were not aware of election debates were less likely to participate in voting in the SRC elections (OR=0.1 [95% CI:0.1- 0.3], p=0.001). The coefficient of -2.052 suggests that for a unit increase in students who were not aware of election debates, voter turnout would decline by an average of 2.052. In relation to the impact of the closing date on voting, there was a positive coefficient (b= 0.803, SE=0.09) and it was found to be a significant predictor of voting for those who indicated that the voting period was long enough (OR=2.2 [95% CI: 1.9-2.7], p-value e <0.001). In relation to exposure to SRC election marketing, there was a strong positive coefficient, and this was found to be a highly significant predictor of voting (b=2.065, SE=0.088), especially among the respondents who had seen SRC election marketing information and materials. Respondents who had seen such marketing were seven times more likely to vote (OR=7.9 [95% CI:6.6-9.3], p=0.001) than those who had not.

Model summary

The Omnibus Test of model coefficients shows a significant chi-square indicating that the model fits well in describing predictors of SRC election voting. However, the Cox and Snell R and Nagelkerke R squares were non-significant. On the other hand, the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test revealed significant results suggesting that the model was a good fit for the predictors of SRC election voting. The study R-squares is 0.42, which implies that the variability in voting could be explained by independent variables at a scale of 42%.

Discussion

The survey had a high response count/rate of 6,851 or 97.4%. This could be an indication of the importance students attached to participation in the SRC elections as a means of ensuring student representation in university decision-making structures and processes.

This study aimed to determine the profile of students who voted in the 2018 SRC elections and assess predictors of voter turnout for SRC elections using binary logistic regression analysis. Additionally, the research sought to ascertain whether and how students' access to ICT infrastructure had influenced turnout during these SRC elections. The profile of the students, including in relation to gender; age; employment; income level; and level and field of study, was analysed to assess whether and how these factors had influenced voter turnout. Taking a closer look at the profile of students who participated in the SRC elections, descriptive analysis revealed less involvement among the young group of students between 18–21 years in the first years of study, which could be explained by the relatively small size of this cohort as part of UNISA's student body. At the same time, participation in elections of the SRC was generally greater among those aged 35 and under. This could be ascribed to the electoral model followed at UNISA, which is student-organisation based and may thus limit interest and engagement among older students. Interestingly, there was no significant difference between those who voted and did not vote by age ($p < 0.460$).

It was found that more female students of Indian descent seemed to be participating in the SRC elections. The reasons for this may relate to access to technology; socio-economic status; and the kind of marketing that was deployed during the elections. This was unexpected in the context of the electoral model and the racial profile of successive SRCs over time.

There was a highly significant difference between those who voted and did not vote by gender, confirming the findings of Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2008) who noted a disparity in voter turnout in relation to gender. Additionally, the results revealed that unemployed females were relatively quite likely (70.6%) to vote, although this could be a reflection of the nature of the high national unemployment rate. This finding may corroborate Berinsky et al.'s (2001) assertion that voting depends on people making time to cast their vote. In this context, unemployed female students might have more time enabling them to vote. Interestingly, the current study also found that males pursuing the highest qualification level were also more likely to participate in SRC-related processes, which may be viewed as testament to Milligan (2003) who found that educated people were more likely to vote. In the context of this study, this finding could also be indicative of the greater interest in politics in general among male students. The income category for both male (76.4%) and female (88.5%) respondents was generally in the ZAR 10,000–350,000 annual income range, regardless of race. This is inconsistent with Harder and Krosnick (2008) who demonstrated income disparity among voters.

Binary logistic regression revealed numerous predictors of SRC voting. The study found that exposure to SRC election marketing was a highly significant predictor of voting. Respondents who had been exposed were seven times more likely to vote

(OR=7.9 [95% CI:6.6-9.3], p<0,001) than those who had not. This variable was the most significant in the study, indicating that greater efforts should be made to address challenges relating to access to, and visibility of, election marketing, including information on the why and how of voting. The second-highest predictor of voting in this study was the impact of the closing date. Those who indicated that the voting period was long enough were two times more likely to vote than those who did not believe it was long enough. At the same time, this study found that adequate time was given to the voter. That there is no justification for the duration allocated for voting to be associated with low voter turnout affirms Berinsky et al.'s (2001) finding regarding the intricate balance that voters must create between their personal engagements and the time that they need to set aside to cast their vote.

The current study also revealed that being unaware of SRC election debates was associated with not voting. Manifesto presentations by candidates are an important factor in moving people who would not otherwise participate in an election closer to casting a vote. This finding is consistent with Ryabchuk (2017) who places the emphasis on the logistical arrangements that electoral agencies should put in place to make voting simple. Noting that this study attributes abstention to a lack of awareness about SRC election debates, organisers of future elections should ensure broad awareness about the debates and ascertain that they are accessible to potential voters.

Other significant predictors of SRC voting were gender, employment status and level of qualification. Females were less likely to vote than males. Accordingly, the way in which the SRC elections are held should challenge the gender imbalances that characterise the country's political landscape at present. Those who were employed on a full-time basis or who were self-employed were less likely to vote. So, future voting campaigns should target these two groups of students in an effort to improve turnout.

Contrary to previous studies (Leighley & Nagler, 1984; Harder & Krosnick, 2008; Wolfinger & Wolfinger, 2008), no significant relationship could be established between age and voter participation in the SRC elections. Similarly, household income disparities were found to be a non-predictive factor in SRC elections, which runs contrary to Leighley and Nagler's (1984) findings and is of interest given the interconnectedness between employment and voter participation that the study found.

Conclusion

This study explored demographic and systemic factors that impacted voter turnout during the 2018 SRC elections at South Africa's largest institution of higher learning, UNISA. The study revealed the importance of numerous factors, including marketing; election debates; gender; employment status; and level of qualification, as significant predictors of voter turnout.

In accordance with structural conduct performance theory, the marketing of the elections using various media including technological infrastructure resonated with the structure of UNISA as an open distance e-learning (ODeL) institution. In this context, the performance of the election system may be seen as reflecting the investment made in

marketing the elections online to reach students who are not on campus but are scattered across the world. Against this background, a key finding was that awareness of election debates could improve voter participation (the coefficient of -2.052 related to electoral debates suggests that for a unit increase in students who were unaware of election debates voter turnout would decline by an average of 2.052). This indicates that proper logistical planning by the organisers and implementers of election projects is required to promote greater awareness of, and engagement in, election debates.

Meanwhile, the disparity in turnout according to level of education among male students, with those at the postgraduate level significantly more likely to vote, could be a reflection of the level of consciousness among this part of the student cohort of students; and may possibly be an indicator of broader societal politics in the country which are male-dominated and in which the level of education among political leaders and public representatives has become an increasingly contentious issue. In essence, the study results indicate that male students who were enrolled for postgraduate studies were more likely to vote than male undergraduates, which could be attributed to a more sophisticated political understanding on the part of the postgraduate students.

The study also revealed an urgent need for the university to revise its policies in an effort to accommodate older students more meaningfully in its electoral dispensation. The relatively low levels of turnout among members of this group seem to indicate that they perceive little or no relevance in the present student party-based system for electing students into SRC office, which also fails to reflect the demographics of the university's student cohort that accurately.

Most of UNISA's student body is composed of students who come from low income-based households. Accordingly, the study reflects no significant impact on voter turnout by student household income.

The limitations of this study include the fact that the survey was conducted months after the elections. So, the circumstances of some of the survey participants might have changed between the elections and the time of survey. Another limitation is that the results of this study cannot be generalised given the uniqueness of UNISA and its student profile. In this regard, future such studies may be undertaken at contact universities. Furthermore, in order to improve the performance of the model, future studies should consider dropping non-significant variables following the first test and run second and third tests in order to reduce multicollinearity which could distort the results.

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