
Your vote is just the beginning

By Ben Turok, Editor, and Zunaid Moolla, Deputy Editor

New Agenda publishes a special extended editorial to acknowledge the crucial 2019 election, where the outcome can be affected by the important youth vote, and yet six million young people under the age of 30 have not registered as voters.

“Democracy is not meant to produce perfect leaders; it is meant to give citizens the tools to control those who are imperfect.” Steven Friedman

Some 285 parties have registered for the 2019 National Elections. That in itself may appear overwhelming, discouraging citizens to make their cross. If you add to that the widespread disillusionment that has set in over the poor performance of the economy, corruption, crime, and the state of our hospitals and schools it is understandable to ask: Can voters make a difference?

In 2019, demographics show that for the first time much will depend on the number of youth who vote. Their vote is crucial if the configuration of political power is to be changed and we take this opportunity to warn against the dangers of the youth abstaining. We are deeply concerned about the prospect that a large number of young people may abstain from the coming elections. If they do, they will be giving up an opportunity to make a difference.

There are no doubt plenty of reasons for their disappointment with party politics and the performance of government. Top among these is the dismal state of our economy, which means few opportunities for decent jobs and few prospects for advancement.

There are also abundant reasons for disenchantment in the political life of our country, which is riddled with careerism and opportunism, empty posturing, and primacy for political party functionaries. Our elected politicians expect special privileges at every turn, even though they may only serve for a few years.

Yet, we have to remember that the very same electoral politics were only attained in 1994 after many long years of intense struggle and much sacrifice. We must also recall that the same process of elections removed the apartheid state and brought to power majority rule.

We should not squander that achievement by staying away now. That way we will open the road to power for mischievous politicians who do not have the public interest at heart. Let us learn from recent events in Brazil where a 40% abstention led to the victory of an obnoxious former army man whose values are a disgrace to that country.

Instead of abstaining, let us call on those seeking to be elected to promise to renew efforts at building an independent non-racial, non-sexist democratic society.

We say independent, so that they pursue economic policies that are good for all our people. Independent in the sense that we are not quite so sensitive to the pronouncements of the rating agencies, which seem to have acquired the authority to dictate economic policy. Independent in the sense that we don't hang onto every

word uttered about South Africa by the likes of the International Monetary Fund. Independent in the sense that we place all our hopes on foreign investors as if their interests are the same as ours.

Let us rather concentrate on vastly improving our own understanding of how our economy works, or rather how it should work. Let us begin an analysis of the various fractions of capital, drawing clear distinctions between those whose interests lie outside the country, those who depend primarily on the domestic economy, those who contribute positively to producing our wealth and those who are merely parasites living off others.

We also need to be absolutely clear on the need for a suitable accommodation with labour without which our economy cannot flourish.

So, rather than be wrapped up in a cloud of pessimism, let us recover some self-confidence as a people responsible for our own destiny. That includes judging our political parties on how they propose to provide leadership to the whole country rather than to special interest groups.

An election is about more than making your mark. It is about making your voice heard to express society's needs, and your demands of those who hold political office.

What has become of the proud and active civil society that once made the country ungovernable? South Africa has demonstrated what it can do when citizens are mobilised, at the



work place, schools and universities, places of religion, in the communities, on the streets. Citizens cannot expect change; they must create change. For an election to make a difference takes more than a vote, but it is the starting point and we must all be ready from right at the start.

The banners will be hung, the posters will dot every street. The walkabouts and rallies will be joined by throngs and the local halls will hum with slogans and songs. Then there will be the interviews on TV and radio and in newspapers. For those who voted in 1994, you will have been through all of this five times now and it will be perfectly understandable if you were to say: oh, another election, *ho-hum*.

Many voters will share this sentiment. There isn't much to be proud of when we think about what has been achieved since we started our democratic journey. Yes, more children are enrolled in schools, there are more clinics and hospitals, and we are "represented" at three levels of government regardless of race, religion, gender or ethnicity. The quality of the education and health care, however, leaves many of us disappointed. The provision of services, the actions of some of our politicians and the levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality fuel our despair.

Amid such deep disillusionment, it may be foolish to expect you to vote. Yet it is precisely in such circumstances that voters can become the architects of change. To abstain now would be to surrender to the very people who have created the mess in which we find ourselves.

So how can we become the game-changers?

VOTING STRATEGICALLY

Our *political* system doesn't lend itself to direct engagement with our political representatives because we cast our vote for a party and not an individual who belongs to a party. One

of the demands we can make during this election is for a system that requires political representatives to earn their vote from communities by making sure that relevant issues are addressed.

Until that happens, though, we should think about voting strategically, in a way that brings more balance into the legislative system or introduces a counterweight to parties that dominate through sheer numbers. This increases the prospect of a check on the power of any one party that might easily perpetuate the squandering of our precious resources and the self-enrichment schemes that have been hatched over the past 25 years.

THE STATE AND ITS CONSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR DEVELOPMENT

The party that wins an election generally interprets its victory as a mandate from "the people." The mandate, however, is rarely carried out and the quid pro quo is rendered void after the party's members are sworn in. Promises are made during the election campaigns but no one is held to account when the promises are broken. We have to think about ways to change this.

It is strategic voting that may be one way to do this. Another would be to consider the legal options available to voters for enforcing the constitutional responsibility of governments and political parties to deliver programmes to improve communities' living conditions. This could include the provision of health and educational services, transport, energy, food, adequate safety and security and the creation of employment opportunities.

During the election campaign, voters should consider demanding of each political party that they sign a pledge to provide some or all of these services, as determined by the communities. Those parties who refuse to sign would forfeit the community's vote and those who

do would have to accept that they will be held legally responsible if they fail to deliver on the agreement.

RACE AND CLASS DIVISIONS

In the 25 years since the transition to political democracy, South African society is still divided along race, class and ethnic lines. Some parties find these divisions politically useful and do not care about the consequences for social and political stability. We see how these divisions have been used in the US and several countries in Europe to practice the politics of exclusion.

Voters should take the initiative in this election to compel political parties to offer practical solutions to heal the divisions that have been festering for two decades. Interventions must cover the full spectrum of human development – health, education, housing, media, places of work and recreation. This would be a way for voters to say that they reject the politics of division, which was the hallmark of apartheid.

INEQUALITY

South Africa is considered to be the most unequal society in the world. Over the past 20 years inequality has become worse and there are no policies in place to address the maldistribution of income and wealth and the structural forces that perpetuate it. With the exception of the introduction of the minimum wage that was introduced this year no party has made this a pillar of its election campaign.

Since 2017, the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) has, through conferences, seminars and publications, raised the issue of inequality and the danger it poses for social and political stability if not remedied.

Among the proposals we have put on the table is that we introduce policies that cap executive pay and lower the differential between the highest- and the lowest-paid earners to no more than five. In South Africa's ►►

large corporations, the highest paid employees earn 17-20 times that of the lowest-paid employees. Political parties should be asked to state what their position is on reducing inequality.

THE LAND QUESTION

Land reform has been the most talked about issue in the country for the past years. Hundreds of ideas have been floated about the best possible government policy to satisfy land hunger, maintain food security and improve the productive use of land. In the last issue of *New Agenda*, in an article on land reform by Pallo Jordan (*New Agenda* 71, Fourth Quarter 2018) he made the point that how we approach the land question has as much to do about our history as it does with the present.

Mr Jordan counsels us to be prudent and to take into account how land reform was undertaken in other countries. He also says there is a need to strike a balance between justice and economic realities as we wade through this emotive and potentially divisive issue. Political parties should be questioned about their approach to land reform: is it practical and viable or is it merely couched in general terms, pandering to popular expectations of how land could be transferred? Will the respective land reform proposals merely transfer land from one group of owners to another, leaving the conditions of the large majority of people unchanged?

CORRUPTION

The deepening rot of corruption is robbing our youth, children and future generations of a better life. The scale of wasteful and fruitless expenditure will put paid to our plans for growth and

national development. How is it that so many millions can be stolen and no one is prosecuted? It tells us that not only are those at the centres of political power benefitting themselves, but the institutions that are supposed to prevent such fraud are being used to shield the culprits. If citizens do not act to claim back these institutions, the thieves will continue to steal with impunity.

We have to demand that those who seek public office (politicians and civil servants) consent to complete transparency about their financial affairs. A lifestyle audit has been proposed before and political parties should be asked to support this for all of their members. They must also be asked to consent to the creation of a database that contains the names of their members and the assets they own (houses, cars, shares in listed companies, business interests). Every eligible voter should have access to this database to check whether the politician's assets match his/her income, or reveal any conflicts of interest. It is also time for the next government to consider setting up a central procurement department that would function independently from politicians and the rest of the civil service.

CRIME

Finally, the issue that plagues South Africans of all backgrounds and from all geographical locations is crime. Township residents suffer the most from violent crimes and it is women and children, in particular, who suffer more than any other group. We often associate crime with poverty and yes, this is valid to some extent. There are, however, many other countries with the same or higher levels of poverty as South Africa which have

much lower levels of violent crime. What are the social, economic and psychological roots of crime in South Africa? Are political parties asking this question and have any of them proposed alternative solutions other than uttering the standard response of more policing, more effective judicial processes and expanding prisons, which they have failed to deliver?

CONCLUSION

South African voters have been passive participants in the past five elections. This is understandable for a country that has made the transition to a procedural democracy only 25 years ago. But participation levels were moderately high in every election since '94, even though there is a declining trend.

Now, however, demographic changes over this period mean that more young people are eligible to vote than in previous elections. That some four million of them have said that they will not vote, as some recent polls have reported, should alarm all of us. Again, this is understandable given the high levels of dissatisfaction with political parties and disillusionment with the prevailing political system, yet abstention is a much more dangerous position to adopt. It opens the space for populist ideologies to gain ground with slim electoral victories.

As history shows, that is how some countries began their journey into the dark abyss of totalitarian rule. Some political schools see elections as a useful game that the ruling class plays according to rules that it makes. Whether you agree with this view or not, until an alternative system is introduced, active voter participation is our effective voice for the kind of society in which we want to live. **NA**