



## 2016 Local Government Elections An Examination of Youth Participation

### 1. Introduction

The South African 2016 Local Government Elections were arguably the most anticipated municipal elections since 1994. This interest can be attributed to a number of issues, ranging from the heightened levels of competition in the political landscape as a result of the formation of the EFF, which has proven to be the most viable 'left' alternative; the recordable growth of a consistent Democratic Alliance; and the burden of corruption and scandal affecting the giant in the political game of South Africa, the ANC.

This briefing paper will look at the participation of the youth in these elections: whether the impact was significant or generally underwhelming. The interest in the youth's electoral participation is informed by the growing interest of young people in the country's politics and their role in it. This can be seen, for example, in the wave of student protests for free education and a range of other issues affecting South Africa's post-apartheid higher education landscape. While this paper will examine youth participation in this year's elections, for comparative purposes it will also consider youth turnout in the 2011 and 2014 polls. This will indicate whether the apparently higher level of youth interest pre-election in fact resulted in a greater percentage of youth voters in 2016.

Moreover, given the context of local government, the manifestos and campaigns of all contesting parties had to be directed to a particular target, being the various local communities of the people of South Africa. Parties are expected to pay attention to day-to-day realities such as poor service delivery, unemployment and housing,

among many others. It is against this background that the youth vote is of interest, for many of these things affect youth directly.

### 2. Young Voters: What Really Matters

*"Government should invest in improving the lives of the poor, especially of those who were born post-1994 in order to enable this generation to realise the importance of participating in democratic processes,"*<sup>1</sup> is how an article commenced on the SANGONeT online page dedicated to democracy and youth participation. This article suggests that democratic processes must have material impact on the improvement of the lives of the poor and vulnerable in society. It also suggests that the youth, from all classes, have a particular interest in social justice. Hence, there is a need to interrogate what really matters to youth as an important first step in understanding and explaining youth participation and/or lack thereof in elections.

One way of doing this is to listen to what well-informed and well-connected young people are saying. It happens that the CPLo employs a number of research interns and assistants, most of whom are post-graduate students with a background in politics and activism. The views in the office have points of divergence and convergence around what matters to the youth, and what could be the reasons for the generally low turnout of young voters.

One research assistant says she cannot relate to the narrative that the youth are apathetic and just aren't interested. She recalls how excited she was

at the prospect of casting her first vote in the 2011 local government elections. More generally, she raises a few reasons she thinks keep the youth turnout at a low. For one thing, she feels that political parties in South Africa do not have a proper analysis or understanding of the youth. Although political parties have done the advisable thing of increasing their social media presence, where a majority of the youth spend a lot of time, they are struggling to communicate a relatable message. She also mentions the fact that party affiliation is often inherited by youth from their parents. The argument is that some youth do not interrogate their parents' choices of political affiliation, but face the conundrum of indifference due to them not sharing the same reasoning when it comes to that particular party.

Another colleague proffers that the youth do not turn out in their numbers, or at least not as much as they are expected to. This reality forces him to think deeper than the surface when attempting to understand the causes of this problem. He notes that many young people are disillusioned with the government of the day, and with issues like corruption and lack of service delivery. He argues that there is less loyalty shown by the youth because they demand immediate material improvement, instead of being used as pawns to defend a legacy they were not even alive to craft.

It is noteworthy, then, that the views of these young people (and to a large extent myself) are that we must try to find the real issues that make young voters sceptical towards electoral activity; and we must note the difference between such considered scepticism and the predominating narrative of an apathetic youth. Hence, the issues they raise around relevance of the message, responsiveness to youth challenges, and party ability to deliver on manifesto are some of the missing factors in the whole debate around the lack of youth participation in elections.

### **3. Party Positions on the Youth**

According to the 2016 Municipal Elections Handbook, the local government elections were contested by 205 political parties.<sup>2</sup> The three big players, however, were the African National Congress, the Democratic Alliance and the Economic Freedom Fighters, which hold by far the largest slices of the South African political terrain. Hence the youth would, most likely, look to these

three players for solutions for their problems, or at least feasible propositions to this effect.

#### **3.1. The ANC**

The ANC's position on issues affecting the youth has over the years been the dominant discourse among the sector. This is largely attributable to the historical record of charismatic leaders in the ANC Youth League. Nonetheless, it is notable that the Youth League has faced serious organizational challenges since the disbandment and expulsion of Julius Malema as its leader. The current executive, led by Collen Maine, has not occupied the same media space or even influenced much of the national discourse, unlike previous Youth League collectives. Therefore, because the proximity of the ANC to the youth is inextricably connected to the effectiveness of the ANC Youth League, one notes a declining youth presence in the ANC's 2016 election campaign and overall message.

The ANC has been projected to lose the youth vote on the basis of steadily dropping confidence in President Jacob Zuma. These projections come after much controversy around the ANC and its leadership, which ultimately has a bearing on its stake as the most popular party in South Africa. However, the dissatisfaction of the youth with the ANC might be based on the faith that young people have, and have had, in the ANC over the years. The election outcomes could be used as an argument for this because, instead of young voters turning out and voting against the ANC, they abstained.

The disillusionment of the youth, as suggested by one of the CPLO interns, can be traced to the lack of accountability, transparency and uprightness displayed by the nation's President. Notwithstanding the criticisms that may be levelled against this assertion, its merits can be found in the reaction of the nation through social media to the Constitutional Court's judgement that the President disregarded his constitutional duty in the Nkandla matter. This, and many other situations, might have been the fire that was added to an already blooming flame of dissonance towards the ANC and the government of the day. Moreover, because the youth have little sense of struggle nostalgia, their tendency to tolerate bad governance and corruption is far less than that of the older population.

Finally, if we look at the ANC 2016 local elections manifesto, there is no real mention of the youth, or dedication of a chapter to deal with issues facing

the youth. This could well be indicative of an insensitivity to young people's concerns, an attitude that might have found an echo in the relative lack of youth turnout for the ANC.

### **3.2. The DA**

The Democratic Alliance has recorded consistent growth in every election since its inception as a party. Its presence in the political landscape of South Africa has been felt through its position as the official opposition in the National Assembly, and as the governing party in the Western Cape. It has now seen its presence in the political arena expand after its commendable performance in the 2016 local government elections.

The DA, unlike the ANC, presents a clear position on the youth, even though it is also superficially general. According to its 2016 local government election manifesto, the DA's youth policy is centred on promoting responsible life choices, reducing substance abuse, and creating alternatives to anti-social behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the leader of the DA, Mmusi Maimane, is a fairly young man himself, and might have attracted some of the vote because of this factor. This is because young people do not only look for a relatable message, but also look at who the messenger is. Can they relate to the messenger? Does the messenger share their sense of urgency around key, material issues? These are all the questions that the youth potentially have, and more times than not Mr Maimane ticks these boxes. The DA has taken over municipalities in areas previously understood to be ANC strongholds, such as KwaLanga and the like. In these areas, the swaying vote most likely was that of young people, because their choices are more fluid compared to older generations who tend to vote according to old loyalties.

### **3.3. The EFF**

The Economic Freedom Fighters have taken the political landscape in South Africa by storm with their leftist rhetoric, and their notable ability to mobilize a large number of young people. The EFF's radical policy positions have been identified as a contributing factor to their ability to attract the youth. The EFF, like the DA, have a young leader, and this might be a factor that resonates with the youth. More so, the EFF's entire leadership consists of young people who seem to be relatable to the youth. However, with this being

noted, the EFF still failed to make a major impact in municipalities such as Ethekeeni and Cape Town. Furthermore, the EFF failed to grow beyond 8% of the total vote, which does not paint a great picture for a party that seems to be reliant on the youth in its effort to secure a definite space in South African politics. It might be, also, that the youth have a merely pragmatic engagement with the message of the EFF and might be uncertain about its long-term intentions and reliability.

The EFF's 2016 local election manifesto does not specifically deal with the youth. The sector is mentioned with regard to general issues such as education, but not in a particularly focused way. This might be one of the reasons why the EFF drastically underperformed and failed to inspire the abstinent youth vote to turnout in its favour.

## **4. The Numbers: 2011, 2014 and 2016**

In an attempt to paint a clear picture of youth participation, a sketching of the voter participation statistics of the last three elections, with a particular focus on the youth (ages 18 – 29) is necessary. In most post-election analyses, reports and publications it seems to be a general finding that young voters are predisposed to lower turnout rates compared to older age groups.

The 2011 local government elections reflect the following:

- A total of 23 654 347 people registered to vote.
- A total number of 13 592 856 votes were cast (57.5% of registered voters).

Out of this, the youth participation looks as follows:

- 8.3 million of the registered voters were youth voters.<sup>4</sup>
- 4.2 million of the youth turned out to vote.
- Thus, 50.6% of registered youth actually voted; clearly, a much lower percentage of eligible young people actually voted.

According to the Institute for Security Studies, the outline of the numbers in the 2014 general election reflects the following:

- A total of 25 388 082 voters registered.
- 18 654 771 of these voters turned out (73.4%).

Out of this, the youth participation looks as follows:

- 10.9 million people between 18 and 29 were eligible to register.
- Out of that number only 6.4 million of them actually registered (58%).<sup>5</sup>
- The figure of actual voters among youth is not known, but it could not have been higher than 58% and was almost certainly much lower. If the pattern followed 2011, as few as 30% of eligible youth might have voted in 2014.

These numbers affirm already existing ideas of youth electoral apathy. Simon Jackman, in a presentation at the International Conference on Civic Education Research, argues that notwithstanding the tendency of elections and parties focussing on short term factors associated with adulthood, the youth also do not exercise their agency as a significant player in elections.<sup>6</sup> This, coupled with the tendency of the youth to have a weaker party political identity than the older population, contributes to the low youth voter turnout.

Figures for the 2016 election bear this out:

- The eligible youth voting population was 11.8 million.
- Only 6.3 million registered (53%).<sup>7</sup>
- The final number of actual youth voters is again not known, but it could not have exceeded 53%, and was probably much lower.

There could be a number of reasonable and valid explanations for these low turnouts of young voters. Some could be as general as the ones mentioned by Jackman, and some could be informed by the intricate political situation South Africa finds itself in. One would have expected many students among the youth to go to the polls to express their perceived dissatisfaction with the

ANC for not legislating free education, as per the resounding demand of 2015. However, this did not happen as expected. Instead, many abstained from voting, as did people across all ages in the voting population.

The youth have been accused time and again of not valuing democracy because they did not have to sacrifice anything to attain it. Their perceived low turnout has been attributed to this ungrateful attitude, associated with an entitled youth. However, there is also an argument to be made that the youth have lost faith in electoral politics because, structurally and systemically, there is no fundamental change happening. For many young people, parties identify areas needing improvement but never really get around to implementing any improvements. It may be that, as a consequence, young voters are more inclined to boycott elections, but if this is the case it is very loosely organized and not well articulated.

Finally, the figures do not present a drastic difference between the youth vote and other voting age populations, which may suggest that we do not need to be worried specifically about young voters. Yes, there is an overriding concern about a low turnout, and also it might be that the expectation is for the youth to be most active when it comes to elections. Nonetheless, international trends do not reflect this anywhere in the world.

## 5. Conclusion

The overall understanding that can be deduced here is that the levels of interest in elections are linked to the political context of the country. However, at the same time, the numbers may not always be reflective of this interest. It might also be that political analysts, various institutes, civil society organizations and academics might link the interesting political developments in the country to a highly contested political election.

It is interesting to note that the campaign messages of the three front-running parties transcended the scope of a conventional local government election manifesto, being more of a national interest message with issues such as education and land reform featuring strongly. It is arguable that the imminent discussion of free education, or education in general, is prompted by the interest shown by students in the matter. It is then not reckless for one to assume that, in future elections, the deciding factor for a number of the

youth will be parties' stances on education and the growing pain of youth unemployment.

With over a million eligible youth voters having abstained from voting in 2016, it is evident that youth activism and engagement with the state does not guarantee electoral agency. It might be that the issues that the youth face are, at one point or the other, addressed by the parties, but the youth might still feel that there is no party fit enough to handle them to their satisfaction. Given that this election was coined as the 'the election of the metros', it was an election determined largely along class lines. However, if after the national shutdowns of universities in 2015, resulting in a highly politicized youth, only just over 50% of 18 – 29 year olds actually turned out to vote, it must mean that the lack of youth participation in elections goes deeper than apathy. Hence, it is

necessary to interrogate factors such as the relevance of party messages and how receptive the youth is to these messages. Ultimately, what is undisputed is that the youth is becoming increasingly active, but this activism is not necessarily translated to electoral participation. That is what is discernible from these local government elections and it is of great concern.

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<sup>1</sup> SANGONeT pulse. "What Can Be Expected From Young Voters in South Africa's 2014 Elections?" retrieved from: <http://www.ngopulse.org/article/what-can-be-expected-young-voters-south-africas-2014-elections>

<sup>2</sup> Independent Electoral Commission. *The 2016 Municipal Election Handbook* (2016).

<sup>3</sup> The Democratic Alliance 2016 Local Government Elections manifesto. Retrieved from: <https://www.da.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/DA-2016-LGE-Manifesto.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Independent Electoral Commission Elections Handbook. 2011 Local Government Election Results

<sup>5</sup> Schulz-Herzenberg, C. *Voter Participation in the South African Elections of 2014*. Institute for Security Studies. Policy Brief 61. August 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Jackman, S. Technology & Politics: Incentives for Youth Participation. Prepared for presentation at the International Conference on Civic Education Research, New Orleans, November 16-18, 2003

<sup>7</sup> Schulz-Herzenberg, C. "Unpacking the 'Youth' Vote". SABC News Live retrieved from: <http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/e62c79804dbb2ecd9b04bbc740c88275/Unpacking-the-%E2%80%98Youth%E2%80%99-Vote-20160308>