

Article

Voter abstention in South African 2014 elections: beyond the apathy argument

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Abstract

This paper explores the attitudes of non-voters in South African 2014 national elections, their reasons for not voting and their views on politics more broadly. It uses data from 60 interviews conducted in ten research sites on election day. We challenge the three components of the apathy argument in explaining voter abstention: that non-voters are apathetic and indifferent, that apathy is about their personal disinterest in politics and lack of political engagement, and that in this apathy they differ from voters. Respondents showed a range of political views, and a range of reasons for not voting (from failure to register on time, residence at a different province, to not seeing a party that would reflect one's views and interests or a conscious boycott of the elections). Overall, they were similar to voters in their answer to the question 'Who would you vote for if you did vote?' in choosing three top parties: ANC, DA and EFF, with emotional and expressive reasons for their choice dominating over rational ones. At the same time, respondents expressed deep dissatisfaction with elections as a way to influence politics – some did not see alternatives to the ANC rule, even though they would be willing to support a smaller party, and others did not think that they could make themselves heard through elections, choosing instead other forms of political engagement.

Introduction

And so it is that the almost 13 million who decided not to participate in the 2014 elections (whether registered or not) are effectively airbrushed from the picture, while the 11.5 million who voted for the ANC become 'the people'. (Dale McKinley 2014)

The winner of these elections is not any of the parties, but, if anyone at all, rather the electorate – or maybe those who ultimately decided not to vote for any of the parties, thereby achieving an intensive debate over politics and political behaviour in the country. (Henning Melber 2014)

South African 2014 elections showed the lowest participation of registered voters since the end of apartheid: a quarter of the 25.39 million registered voters decided not to cast their votes, and 250,000 spoiled their ballots. More than 40 per cent of the voting age population (citizens above the age of 18, both registered and unregistered) stayed away, and as a result the ANC received the support of only 36.4 per cent of South Africans who could vote (Schulz-Herzenberg 2014:23).

Although South African debates around elections often include a specific interest in non-voters, few attempts were made to understand the motives of non-voters, and what exactly their abstention means for the major political players and for the twenty-year old South African democracy (one of the exceptions is Tom Lodge (1999) on reasons for abstention in the 1999 elections). Instead of analysis, one is often presented with ready-made explanations on non-voters being ‘apathetic’ and ‘uninterested’ in politics. Melber (2014:1) notes ‘growing voter apathy, in particular among young voters’, without providing any evidence to support this statement. The book *Elections 2014 South Africa*, edited by Colette Schulz-Herzenberg and Roger Southall (2014), does not have a single chapter on non-voters, and only four authors (Southall, Schulz-Herzenberg, Duncan and Mattes) dedicate at least one paragraph in their chapters to non-voters. Seven out of 13 chapters do not mention non-voters at all, or only refer to potential non-voters indirectly and in passing through formulations like ‘unenthusiastic citizens’ (2014:43), ‘disenchanted black workers’ (2014:73), ‘uncommitted, disillusioned or abstaining voters’ (2014:105). Thus, although the commonplace stereotypical formulation on non-voters being disenchanted and uncommitted has been rebuked in scholarly literature on voting abstention,¹ it is widely used in mass media, popular discourses and scholarly publications alike.

One may object, that several quantitative studies have looked at the question of abstention in South Africa, and that there is statistical evidence to claim that apathy, disillusionment or disinterestedness are indeed the most widespread motives for abstaining. For instance, the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) Quality of Life survey, conducted in 2013, had three questions on elections and voting. The first one (question X6_1) was whether the respondent was registered to vote in the 2014 elections, with 45.9 per cent of the 27,490 respondents saying ‘yes’, and 54.1 per cent ‘no’. An overwhelming majority of those registered, 93.7 per cent, were intending to vote (question X6_2). The remaining 6.3 per cent of those who did not plan

to vote gave a variety of reasons for abstaining. The most common response with 46.1 per cent was coded as ‘don’t like politics, broken promises, waste of time’, followed by ‘does not think his/her vote will make any difference’ (27.9 per cent) and ‘don’t care’ (10.7 per cent) and ‘don’t know who to vote for’ (7.7 per cent). Logistical obstacles, coded as ‘no ID’ (0.7 per cent) and ‘not allowed to vote, for example not RSA citizen’ (1.7 per cent) were quoted by only 2.4 per cent of respondents (0.7 per cent and 1.7 per cent respectively), and ‘other’ responses had 5.2 per cent of answers by those 795 respondents who were registered but not planning to vote.²

While the GCRO looks at electoral behavior as one of many issues and is limited in its scope to Gauteng, the South African Electoral Commission (IEC) conducts regular nationally representative voter participation surveys. The most recent one was prior to the 2014 election (between October and December 2013), and was administered by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). The IEC in its press release concludes that non-voters’ abstention is explained through political apathy: ‘Most of those South Africans who did not intend to register as voters cite a general lack of interest, disinterest in political parties, a lack of motivation or government efficacy as the primary reasons’ (HSRC 2014). Indeed, its survey data shows that only 17 per cent of those planning to abstain pointed to administrative obstacles such as not being registered or not having IDs, while for 71 per cent of respondents the main reason stated was ‘disinterest or disillusionment’ (general lack of interest for 49 per cent, lack of interest in political parties for 9 per cent and loss of a sense that voting makes a difference for 8 per cent (HSRC 2014).

The conclusion of the IEC press release is that political disillusionment ‘speaks to the character and performance of the political system and its level of accountability to the electorate’ (HSRC 2014). In fact, the study revealed a decline in satisfaction with democracy, with 48 per cent of respondents, both voters and non-voters, voicing discontent compared with 36 per cent that are satisfied. Furthermore, 63 per cent noted that the country is going in the wrong direction, and only a quarter of respondents trust political parties and politicians (trust in the national government has also fallen from 61 per cent in 2009 to 44 per cent in 2013). Similarly, in the GCRO study, almost 60 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘the country is going in the wrong direction’ (question X6_23), and 43.5 per cent agreed that politics is a waste of time (question X6_20). As far as perceived ability to influence political life, 31.6 per cent of respondents to the GCRO study

agreed that people like them cannot influence developments in their community (question X6_22), and 39 per cent agreed that no one cares about people like them (question X6_38). This data shows widespread political disillusionment among both voters and non-voters.

Thus, although GCRO and IEC data at a first glance seem to confirm the apathy argument, a closer observation reveals a more complex reality. Their data present some insights into the political meaning of abstention that will be used as a starting point for this paper. First of all, under the umbrella of apathy and disillusionment we hear non-voters quoting a variety of reasons, ranging from distrust and disinterestedness in existing political parties, to a sense that voting does not make a difference. Secondly, rather than indicating non-voters' personal lack of interest in politics, it indicates government's perceived poor performance and lack of accountability. And finally, even if political apathy and disinterestedness may be more widespread among non-voters, it is also common among voters, and the two categories are probably not that different from each other in their evaluation of the political processes. The following sections explore these three critical points in greater detail, drawing on primary data collected on election day from 60 short interviews with non-voters, by researchers of the South African Research Chair for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg in ten sites: Bekkersdal, Bokfontein, Diepkloof, Dube hostel, Marikana, Motsoaledi, Noordgesig, Potchefstroom, Thembelihle and Zamdela. In this article respondents are identified by site names and numbers from 1 to 10 for each site (so respondents from Bekkersdal will be identified as 'Bekkersdal, respondent #1', 'Bekkersdal, respondent #2' and so on, the same for other sites – 'Bokfontein, respondent #1', 'Zamdela, respondent #1'. Although it was impossible to quote all respondents, an effort was made to include as many voices as possible. As a result, a third of the respondents are quoted, and none are quoted more than twice.

Interviews were conducted by groups of four to six fieldworkers in each site and were part of a larger study on voting behavior. Apart from qualitative data that this paper analyses, the study also comprised a quantitative survey of 3,782 voters leaving the voting stations in 16 sites (for an overview of findings see Marcel Paret, forthcoming). Each team also submitted a fieldwork report, in some cases including photographs from research sites. Teams consisted of a coordinator from among the senior members of the Chair (plus a qualified fieldworker with experience of research in that specific site, in cases where the coordinator has not previously done fieldwork there or

lacked knowledge of local languages), and two to three junior researchers (both male and female) proficient in local languages, who all received training prior to election day. Thus, potential biases of race, ethnicity and gender, as well as questions of familiarity with research sites, were taken into consideration by the research team.

The teams began its work next to the voting stations in each site, with two to three members remaining by the stations for quantitative research, and other two to three members moving into the residential areas around the voting stations, asking to speak to non-voters. Possible biases arising out of this approach are related to non-representativeness of such a sample. Some of the non-voters may not have been at home. Furthermore, the residential areas around each of the voting stations may not have been homogenous, with different socio-economic and race groups living further away. We are aware of these possible biases and thus treat our study as exploratory, avoiding generalisations to the entire population of non-voters.

Reasons for abstention: between logistical obstacles and political statements

Although scholars seem to agree that abstention is of political significance and that non-voters are making a political statement (whether consciously or not), we do not always know what exactly this statement is in the South African context. We also do not know who are the non-voters, and the reasons for their abstention. Carin Runciman (forthcoming) points to the fact that when low voter turnout is examined in South African social and political scholarship, ‘it is usually with reference to how institutional mechanisms cause low voter turnout and how these mechanisms can be improved’, while the reasons for abstention that individuals may hold (political apathy, a ‘normalization of democracy’, or a form of protest) are largely left unexamined.

The first set of reasons given by our respondents was of logistic nature: failure to register on time, registration in a different province³ and inability to travel home to vote, loss of ID, problems encountered at voting stations, etc. Many of the respondents who gave such reasons also expressed their wish to vote (‘I wanted to vote, but I didn’t register on time’). They also usually knew who they would have voted for if they had voted. Supporters of different parties could be found in this category (ANC, DA, EFF, NPF) as well as those who would have spoiled their ballots, sometimes unconsciously (‘I was coming to vote for all of them because I don’t want to cause conflicts’,

Thembelihle, respondent #1). Some other answers include:

When there were registrations I wasn't here and I didn't follow up. I heard through a friend. I wanted to vote actually. My friend told me last year when there were registrations, she told me when they were finishing off around past nine and they were closing at 12 in town, and I didn't have transport to take me there quickly to register. I was going to vote for EFF. (Potchefstroom, respondent #2)

I did not vote as I did not register because when I went back home in the Eastern Cape to go register it was too late. I do not stay at Motsoaledi but I stay in a surrounding location which is Phefeni. I would have voted for the DA as I want jobs and want to see change. They [the ANC] have been promising us jobs and they have failed to deliver on those promises. (Motsoaledi, respondent #15)

The reason that made me not vote... I didn't register, but I would have loved to vote. The party ... I would have voted for NFP. It would have been my first time voting so I don't know why this party. (Dube hostel, respondent #4)

Inconveniences, encountered at voting stations, like long queues, or lack of competent personnel to answer questions related to IDs, also led some potential voters to abstain. According to the HSBC 2014 study, evaluation of the IEC work on election day was positive overall: out of the 17 per cent who did not plan to vote in 2014 elections because of administrative barriers, 16 per cent were not registered or did not possess necessary documents to register, and only less than one per cent listed long queues, polling station being far away, or not knowing where to vote as major barriers that impacted on their decision not to vote. However, somewhat contradictory data from the same study revealed that 28 per cent of non-voters would have considered voting if queues were shorter or if voting station was closer to their home (HSBC 2014).

I would have voted for ANC. My problem is my ID is destroyed, and it is that old one, held together by staples. I thought maybe those people who deal with IDs would appear [at the voting station], to ask who wants an ID, then I would get one. So I cannot untangle it with all those staples to vote. (Bokfontein, respondent #4)

I have sugar diabetes, so I'm standing here and so I took some medication, so I see that it better that I leave. I've decided I'm not voting. After drinking these medications for sugar they make me feel like this, so when I will fall, they will say she was kicking and kicking, did you see her? So I just decide to leave. (Thembelihle, respondent #1)

Research teams also noted that there were queues at voting stations. In Motsoaledi, for instance, the queue was so long in the morning that a second tent was set up around 9am next to the first one to speed up the process. At some of the research sites, inability to register or to vote had more serious logistic causes, as in the case of Bekkersdal at the stage of registration: ‘The most significant group, however, were people who did not have a chance to register because of the protests and unrest that occurred during the IEC voter registration weekends (November 2013 and February 2014). These people largely wanted to vote, but they were not registered’ (2014, fieldwork notes, Bekkersdal), or in Alexandra on the day of the election: ‘There were accusations that the IEC was allowing people to vote twice, and that ANC cadres were bussing voters between different polling stations to vote a second time. This eventually shut down the entire polling station’ (2014, fieldwork notes, Alexandra).

However, it is worth noting that in some cases it is difficult to tell, whether there were indeed significant obstacles that prevented our respondents from registering and voting, or whether indifference might have been a more prominent cause, as in the following quote by a young born-free: ‘I didn’t go register because I’m lazy, so maybe some people also just felt that they are lazy to register, maybe because look at the way I think it’s just a long procedure to register and all that’ (Noordgesig, respondent #1). Interestingly, this respondent is internalising the active voters claim about non-voters being lazy, thus it seems like a ‘lazy’ rationalisation for an act which is not considered worthwhile enough to spend time for. It is easier to explain one’s decision not to vote by own laziness, rather than insist that indifference and apathy are valid expressions of one’s political position.

It was also clear from the interviews that some of the non-voters were simply not aware of their right to vote in a different area from where they were registered, as confirmed by fieldwork notes from KwaThema: ‘Some people also thought they could only vote at the station at which they were registered’ (2014, fieldwork notes, KwaThema), or their right to register even if they did not own housing, but were renting shacks: ‘I didn’t vote because I don’t have a house, I am renting. But I’m a South African and have an ID’ (Bokfontein, respondent #5).

Research teams also confirmed that among the non-voters they interviewed most seemed to be either registered elsewhere and unaware they could vote at a different voting station, were registered but had problems with their IDs, or did not register but still wanted to vote: ‘We found that many, especially

the younger folk, did not vote because of irregularities with their identification documents. Many either had no identity document, failed to register, or were registered elsewhere' (2014, fieldwork notes, Noordgesig), or 'Many of the non-voters were citizens who did not have an ID (one guy explained to me that his ID was at his brother's house in another township and he did not have money to go get it)' (2014, fieldwork notes, Bekkersdal).

On the other extreme we have respondents who were very clear about their dissatisfaction with electoral politics and made a conscious decision not to participate in elections. It is a form of boycott along the lines of the 'No land, no house, no vote' campaign. Respondents who provided such reasons stressed specifically that they will not vote until they get jobs and houses from the government. A non-voter who would have chosen the DA said that there is 'no point' in voting because 'there are no jobs, there are no houses. Right now we will vote, then after voting they will take seats and leave a wealthy life with the children while we just live. No it's better for someone to just leave these votes' (Potchefstroom, respondent #2). She continues:

I will not vote with my new ID, to mess it up for all this nonsense. For how long have we been registering and the houses have not been delivered. I even stayed 5 days in jail. [...] We were on protest so that we can get our rights, but we still have not gotten our rights till now. They talked about me and took me out of the house and I was not a protester. So you see how the whole thing is? I should keep my ID and nobody will come ask me; why didn't you vote? I will beat them up when they at the entrance of my house door. I will not stress. I will hit them hard with my wooden stick; they will feel how a wooden stick of a person from Free State is so good. (Potchefstroom, respondent #2)

Finally, between logistic problems and a political boycott we found a variety of responses that could be classified to a certain degree as 'apathetic'. The notion of political apathy presupposes indifference and lack of interest in politics, together with the feeling that one's vote does not really change anything and it is not worth it, as witnessed in some of the interviews conducted:

Well voting...just putting a sign there on the ballot paper doesn't mean I'm fighting or anything. So, me putting my sign there or not it wouldn't do anything for me, it's not like they were to give me a paper or something to write down my problems, what is it that I'm not happy about so I don't see any difference there. (Dube hostel, respondent #4)

It is because we didn't go register because we were so lazy and stuff [...]

Actually – God, I cannot say it otherwise – yeah. It feels it’s unnecessary to vote. It’s such a waste of time. (Potchefstroom, respondent #4)

I never registered, never voted. Ever since 94, all four years the same, I’m not interested. Nothing has changed. And it’s still going to happen again. Nothing will change. Even if you vote, nothing will change, it will still be the same [...] People won’t vote, they realize it’s not important. Nothing has happened. So what must the people do? Government is supposed to help the people but they are doing nothing. (Noordgesig, respondent #7)

However, this reason was only given by three respondents interviewed, so there are no evidence indicating that this is the predominant attitude of non-voters. Moreover, these respondents were of different age and socio-economic groups, which challenges the argument about widespread apathy among the youth. The first person quoted is a 34 year old black unemployed male from Dube hostel who previously voted for ANC, the second one – a born free university student from Potchefstroom for whom it is the first opportunity to vote, and the third one – a middle-aged coloured resident of Noordgesig, who was eligible to vote in all elections since 1994, but never voted. The IEC data also shows a diversity of socio-economic and race groups among non-voters. Intention to vote the 2014 elections was lowest (below 70 per cent) among the youth of 18-19 years, followed by Indian and coloured population, and dwellers of informal settlements (HSBC 2014).

At the same time, when we asked respondents why they thought *others* might have abstained from voting, we received answers that apathy is the most common reason of abstention among the youth: ‘I think most of the youth, most of the born frees⁴ didn’t even bother to go and register, so maybe they don’t care about politics’ (Dube hostel, respondent #7), ‘They don’t see politics these [young] people, they are only looking forward, looking at themselves alone’ (Potchefstroom, respondent #4), or ‘The young ones aren’t interested in politics. I’ve asked many of them myself’ (Bokfontein, respondent #8).

Some of the older respondents were even contrasting the ‘irresponsible’ youth to the ‘responsible’ adults (who may be abstaining because they are discouraged, but can be persuaded to vote), as witnessed in the following quote:

The young people were given rights but they were not told of their responsibility. [...] That’s now the problem we have with the young here in South Africa. They’ve got the rights but they don’t want to act

responsibly. For instance, he will tell you it's his right to stand in the street and urinate but he doesn't know that he must go to the toilet to urinate. He will tell you it's his right to come at the house at 12 o'clock at night but he doesn't know that he can be pitched on the way; he can be robbed on the way. There's a problem we've got with young kids of South Africa, most especially the blacks. [...] Most of the adult people they are sharing this responsibility, but some of them they are getting discouraged, but we must keep on encouraging them to go and vote. Two or three people that I know said they are not going to vote because they are not happy about the situation of the scandals in the ANC. (Zamdela, respondent #3)

This quote reveals a common stereotype about differing reasons of abstention among the youth and the older adults that is probably picked up by our respondents from the media. The youth are seen as simply uninterested in politics and abstaining irresponsibly, while the older adults are presented as having more valid reasons, like being discouraged or unhappy with current politics. However, Schulz-Herzenberg provides evidence that although fewer young people vote, they are as interested in politics as older South Africans (2014:35). Duncan suggests that 'overwhelmingly, the media message was "go out and vote", with little reflection on the possibility that not voting might not be attributable to voter apathy only, but because the act of voting had come to be seen skeptically, as an act that would change little. This is especially so for young people who have been condemned to the margins of South Africa's political economy' (2014:153).

It is true, that participation of the youth in elections was lower than of other age groups: Schulz-Herzenberg (2014:22) provides data, according to which only 58 per cent of all eligible voters between 18 and 29 years were registered for the 2014 election, and among the 18-19 year olds this figure was just 33 per cent. But there could be other reasons for such low registration rates. Using data from Jeremy Seekings' research (2005), Schulz-Herzenberg strengthens her argument that young South Africans are very similar in their attitudes towards democracy as older generations, although they may be more unpredictable, willing to support opposition parties, and responsive to short-term political events.

It is worth adding, that the majority of our respondents would have liked to vote, and some knew who they would have voted for. This result is confirmed by the IEC 2013 survey data, where only 13 per cent of non-voters responded that nothing would persuade them to vote (a rise from 7 per cent

in 2004). The remaining 87 per cent listed several factors that could encourage them to vote: voting facilities for 28 per cent of respondents (if queues were shorter, if the polling station was closer and one could get there more easily); registration process for 7 per cent (if one did not have to register or could use old ID to register); political efficacy for 38 per cent (if one felt that one's vote would make a difference in the election outcome and was more convinced that it was important to vote, in particular in national government elections, if there was a political party one strongly believed in, and if parties tried harder to get one's vote); and socio-demographic factors for 5 per cent ('if more people of my age voted' or 'if persons with disabilities were assisted to go and vote'). That 'political efficacy' would have persuaded more than a third of respondents to vote shows that for many non-voters abstention is a political statement (of dissatisfaction with current politics), rather than lack of political engagement.

Abstention as an indicator of failures of representative democracy

Abstention in itself can be a political statement, as it can be a consequence of disappointment with politics, and with the government failing to deliver on its electoral promises. The friend of the young respondent from Potchefstroom who said that voting is 'a waste of time', agreed with her by adding that some people may not want to vote 'because they've been disappointed in the parties they've already voted for and didn't get the results people were promised' (Potchefstroom, respondent #4). Comments such as 'there are no results' and 'nothing is happening' were very common themes among respondents who defined themselves as discouraged and who could be classified among the indifferent voters, as can be seen from the comments below:

Why I did not vote is because that now I see that now that this country of ours, even now, there is no control, that it does not consist of the truth, there is no truth total. [...] Because sometimes when the votes are nearer like when there are few weeks or few days remaining, they bring hampers and blankets so they can be voted for, so why don't they bring them when the time is there? (Thembelihle, respondent #7)

I voted the first time and there was no change... There are many reasons why I am not voting, like for example, we all know the living condition here in Bekkersdal. I am staying at an informal settlement at Mandela, Zakhele. We are using one central tap and we don't have decent toilets... There is no change in this democracy. (Bekkersdal, respondent #2)

Look, all parties are corrupted. It's a given fact, but your goods need to outweigh your bads. [...] There is no accountability, they shuffle things down people's throats, you know. Right now things are so bad, you need to buy to be a member; they force things through you. And me, I'm just not happy [...] I'm not going to listen to someone who is saying, no, but it did this or that for someone who passed away. No. I don't do that. (Diepkloof, respondent #1)

A similar set of reasons that can be classified as a more informed and politically motivated type of indifference to politics than simple 'apathy', is related to a general feeling of disappointment with politics, in particular with corruption and lack of accountability. Nathan Hanna noted that abstention is not commonly perceived as a reasonable and justified dissatisfaction with elections or as a 'refusal to help perpetuate the serious problems that need reform':

[Abstention] can be an attempt (or part of one) to influence things in another way - a way outside the narrow confines the electoral process conventionally affords us. It can be a way of trying to influence the electoral process itself and others' attitudes toward it. Abstaining can express dissatisfaction with the electoral process and can be a way of advocating reform. It can be an act of protest. Such acts are not causally impotent. They have an influence on policy on their own. They may not achieve the desired result, but in that respect they are similar to voting'. (Hanna 2009:283)

It is worth adding, that all of our research sites were places where the ANC rule has been challenged over the past few years either through protests and strikes (Bekkersdal, Bokfontein, Dube hostel, Marikana, Motsoaledi, Thembelihle and Zamdela), or through a changing class and race structure (Noordgesig formerly being reserved for 'coloureds' and with a high level of support for the DA, Potchefstroom having a large student population, and Diepkloof being a relatively well-off 'black' township). Among pragmatic reasons for choosing these communities were questions of access: prior research conducted by members of the Research Chair for Social Change, as well as vicinity to Johannesburg, making it possible to arrive to research sites in the morning and return to Johannesburg in the evening.

However, the ANC received the majority of votes in all of these communities. Susan Booysen (2007) explained this paradox through the 'ballot and the brick' theory, where in the same municipalities people who criticise the ANC by engaging in protests in between elections also vote for the ANC during elections. She believes that protests and voting are ways

to show support to the ANC during elections and then put pressure to deliver on their electoral promises. However, as Runciman (forthcoming) observes, this theory does not take into consideration a large percentage of non-voters, and the fact that perhaps the people who vote and who do not vote have differing views on politics (and participation in protests in particular). Perhaps, if the non-voters did vote, support for the ANC would not have been so overwhelming, as suggested by Robert Mattes:

In most democracies, non-voters are characterized mostly by lower socio-economic resources, social isolation, and political apathy. However, their voting preferences do not differ systematically from the people who do vote. Higher levels of turnout would result in only minor differences in election results. In South Africa, however, it is clear that lower levels of voter turnout drive up the ANC's vote share because many people, while dissatisfied with the ANC, do not see any opposition party as inclusive or trustworthy. (Mattes 2014:184)⁵

This does not necessarily mean that non-voters think differently about politics, but that those who decide to vote after all, are more willing to 'give ANC another chance' than those who do not. It could be that unlike those of the disenchanted former ANC supporters who gave their votes to opposition parties, non-voters do not see any other parties that could represent them. According to the IEC survey (HSBC 2014), 9 per cent of respondents did not intend to vote in the 2014 elections or did not believe elections are an efficient way to participate in politics, and 8 per cent think their vote will not make a difference. Southall and Schulz-Herzenberg observe that the ANC has been winning every successive elections 'with large vote share percentages but from decreasing proportions of eligible voters, and that fewer and fewer South Africans are willing to cast legitimacy over a regime, while more and more begin to believe that democracy has failed them' (2014:238). Perhaps what the non-voters are saying through their abstention is reflected in an observation by Steven Friedman, namely that the problem of participation 'is not that citizens are unwilling to take part in politics or in the policy debate. It is that willingness to vote does not ensure participation in policy discussion' (2009:13).

Another question of the IEC studies that is relevant for discussion on voter abstention is the question on the meaning of voting (formulated as 'Can you describe what it means to you to vote?'). Southall and Mattes (2002:16) believe that responses to this question show that most South Africans attribute positive meaning to voting, with only 4 per cent saying

that voting does not make a difference, and 6 per cent responding ‘Don’t know’ in the IEC 1999 voter participation study. However, the most common response is not a ‘positive’ one, but neutral. It is coded as ‘Voting is about electing representatives’ (42 per cent), and those who answer in such a way may not themselves be planning to vote (The other three answers to this question were coded as ‘Voting allows transmission of needs and demands’ (41 per cent), ‘Voting symbolizes citizenship’ (26 per cent), ‘Voting allows for identification with charisma’ (10 per cent), and ‘Other’ (5 per cent) and voters were allowed to provide several answers to this question). This may be the explanation of the mismatch in the IEC reports between the numbers of those who plan to vote and those who actually make it to the voting station (77 per cent of all eligible voters were planning to vote in the 2014 elections, but only 59 per cent did). Although 79 per cent of South Africans agreed it is the duty of all citizens to vote (a drop from 84 per cent in 2004), only 46 per cent believed that their vote makes a difference (down from 68 per cent in 2004), and 43 per cent agree with the statement that ‘voting is meaningless because no politician can be trusted’ (up from 19 per cent), and 41 per cent think that voting is pointless, because after being elected all parties are the same (up from 20 per cent in 2004), according to the IEC study (HSBC 2014).

One of the limitations of IEC voter participation surveys, according to Runciman (forthcoming) is that ‘respondents are presented with a list of what could be characterised as “negative options” to explain disinterest and disillusionment. What is excluded is an option in which not voting can be considered as an expression of political dissatisfaction but also an active concern with politics’. She concludes that since South African politics are dominated by one political party, voting for an opposition party is not perceived as an alternative by many of the country’s poor who want to respond to the decline of quality of life.

On the other hand, Piombo (2005:255-6) notes that there is nothing surprising in decreasing levels of turnout compared to founding elections of 1994, as it is a common trend globally with second elections. In fact, from 1999 South African participation rates approached those of other countries at similar levels of economic development and with similar dominant party systems. Although the ANC critics presented this decline as a symptom of a declining democracy, ANC supporters rebuked them by saying that the decline represents the normalisation of the democratic process and apathy is not a problem.

South Africa is indeed facing widespread frustration among the poor over a lack of jobs, housing and service delivery that has a significant impact on electoral process and outcomes (Alexander 2012). One should therefore not be surprised that some people may choose not to vote as a means to express their dissatisfaction. A young unemployed respondent from Dube hostel summarised that it is lack of jobs and service delivery that convinced him that ‘voting is useless’:

The first thing I can say is that I don’t have a job at the moment. Why should I vote? I don’t see the service delivery. For now look at this...what the fuck is that? Like the potholes there, you see. They can’t fix our street, they can’t give us jobs, they can’t do shit for us. These people, they just think for their selves. I just call them introverts, they don’t think for other people. As long as ANC is the leading party they are fine with that. What other people say out there, they don’t care. (Dube hostel, respondent #4)

In this regard, our abstaining respondents are similar to voters interviewed who chose to vote for one of the opposition parties (most commonly the DA or the EFF), in order to ‘give them a chance’ and to challenge the power of the ANC. Another feature that seems to unite voters and non-voters, was a refusal to identify current ANC policies with the legacy of Mandela, a refusal to ‘vote for Mandela’ as encouraged by the ANC on election posters. However, when we asked respondents to explain why in their view the ANC is still so popular, the response was precisely because of the emotional attachment to Nelson Mandela and the legacy of anti-apartheid struggle:

Zuma is just a corrupt president, there is nothing I can say about that guy. I can say million things and I’m telling you 80 per cent of the things I’m going to say it’s negative stuff about him. So it’s not about Jacob Zuma, it’s about Nelson Mandela. (Dube hostel, respondent #4)

Me I like the old man Mandela, what Zuma is doing I do not care. I will be loyal to it... But as we are living here in the mines, I think under the strike the ANC might have said something bad against the strike and I think that made people to run and that will make the EFF famous. (Marikana, respondent #2)

One may conclude, based on the variety of reasons for not voting, that our respondents were not that different from other South Africans who do vote. This may be yet another critique of the apathy argument that sets non-voters apart, and is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Similarities between voters and non-voters

An aspect that was similar between non-voters and voters interviewed is an overall positive evaluation of the legacy of the ANC, despite its current leadership, and Jacob Zuma in particular. One of the born-frees interviewed said that thanks to the anti-apartheid struggle he was born ‘having everything: freedom of speech, freedom of whatever’. To interviewer’s question ‘What’s your take on Jacob Zuma’s administration’ he responded ‘No comment’. He then added: ‘I don’t care about Jacob Zuma. I’m doing this for Nelson Mandela’, explaining further:

You know, because out of this struggle and everything people used to say ‘ok, let me vote for the ANC because of what happened in the past’. About Madiba things and all that. So basically these people will stay in the ANC forever and ever until Jesus comes. [...] Those very people that have been striking and burning and all, all of those people in fact most of them will still go and vote for the ANC. (Noordgesig, respondent #6)

Some of the voters mentioned that ‘It does not matter what they do wrong, I am still loyal to them. I would not criticise the ANC as they gave us political freedom. I do protest even though I am an ANC member’ (Motsoaledi, respondent #16). Others claim that they have no right to criticise the ANC: ‘We don’t have the right to comment on what has happened to father Zuma. All we are looking at is our way forward and the manner’ (Thembelihle, respondent #2), or ‘The older people say they won’t leave their father’s house just because they see their father sleeping’ (Bokfontein, respondent #8). The ANC seems to be well aware of this emotional attachment, not only by designing electoral posters with Nelson Mandela’s portrait, but also in media shots of Jacob Zuma giving interviews about his role in anti-apartheid struggle or visiting Nelson Mandela in his hospital bed.

An elderly man from Zamdela, who has been an ANC member since 1975, made it clear that he is not happy about Jacob Zuma, but is nevertheless happy about the ANC for giving out social grants and RDP houses that ‘we didn’t have in the past, so it is a step forward’:

It’s just that the big boy [Zuma] has been involved in a lot of scandals. There was now that scandals of that girl that claimed to be raped and thereafter do you remember the girl vanished, where is that girl? There was now this thing of Khoza’s daughter who had a child with Zuma. There’s now this thing of Nkandla in this... All of those things they don’t deserve to be on the president’s bad list. [...] He claims his wife was raped in Nkandla, what about the other people who were raped?

Is the wife so much important, better than other people? How many victims of rape are there in life here since his reign here in South Africa? (Zamdela, respondent #3)

This response from another respondent is in line with many other respondents' answers:

We got houses because of the ANC and no matter what happens I love the ANC and not the person leading the party. You are not supposed to argue or fight with the person. Even though there might be corruption, the party isn't involved in that corruption. The mistake is done by a person and not the party. I don't care about Zuma. I chose the party because I like it. [...] You know what I say, I say it happens that a person is given a position and they say he's been abusing funds and they want this person to give up his/her position and then they look for a new person again. That thing I don't like it. We have to talk to this person who holds the current position to sort themselves out and get their ducks in a row. Not to find a new person and start afresh and if the new person is also 'hungry' then we'll start afresh again no. (Zamdela, respondent #2)

You know, they have got very good policies for the poor, they try to elevate the poor, they have got really good structures and ANC has done actually has done a lot. [...] If you're standing in the rural areas you get a grant for transportation, you get a grant for getting food. So there is a lot of stuff they are actually doing, that's good. Just the president is the one I do not identify with and unfortunately it seems that he doesn't identify with me. Unfortunately not. (Diepkloof, respondent #1)

At the same time, interviewed respondents seemed to understand the reasons behind the growing popularity of the DA and EFF in formerly ANC-voting areas. One non-voter explains that 'Most of the youth are going with EFF because Zuma was given a chance, and Malema must also be given a chance [...] He promised youth jobs and many things' (Potchefstroom, respondent #2). Another respondent gave similar reasons for choosing the DA:

Excuse me. I just want change. Tired of the same old disappointments you've been getting. Unemployment, corruption, all of those things. They're just depressing – to read about it in the newspapers. Everything, you can see there everything that discredits the country that you live in. [...] I'm thinking of change, something different, maybe DA would be the way for it, I'm not sure. I'm just hoping it's a way forward, yes. (Diepkloof, respondent #2)

What was interesting in these respondents' answers is that they did not choose opposition parties for their programmes, but simply for the fact that they were an alternative to the ANC. One of the non-voters from Motsoaledi said that if she were to vote, she would have chosen 'either the DA or the EFF'. To a follow-up question to find out if there was something in the program of these parties she particularly liked, the respondent answered that she 'just wants change'. In a chapter dedicated to the ANC campaign in 2014, Butler suggests that the EFF is in fact a competitor to the DA, rather than the ANC (2014:49). In a survey conducted in the context of our study, among the reasons given by respondents to justify their choice, 'change' was a common explanation, especially among DA and EFF supporters, where 27 per cent and 37 per cent of supporters respectively gave this justification, although as Paret (forthcoming) notes, the notion of change was a common buzzword, often uttered without any indication of what change means.

Some of the research teams were expecting to find more principled non-voters who would be following Ronnie Kasrils' campaign,⁶ or the 'No land, no house no vote' call for boycott: 'We think some people were in favour of Kasrils' campaign but they were scared to say so' (2014, field notes, KwaThema), and in particular in Bekkersdal: 'For all of the talk of community plans to boycott in the media, we found little evidence of this in the weeks leading up to the election, or on election day. There was no visible contingent of non-voters, and no clear organisational support for a boycott. Indeed, the environment on 7 May, election day, was the exact opposite. The mood was jubilant and one of friendly electoral competition with people showing their colors and parading about' (2014, field notes, Bekkersdal).

This observation could be in part explained by making a distinction between instrumental and expressive motivation for voting, the first one being a sort of 'investment' into a political party that would promote one's interests, while the second one (presumably more prevalent among those South Africans who decide to vote despite being dissatisfied with current politics) is seeing voting as 'an act of consumption', associated with social or moral reasons – affirming one's social identity, meeting with friends, or feeling an emotional attachment to a particular party or a moral call to participate in elections (Drinkwater and Jennings 2007:180).

The central role played by identity in voting behavior is largely ignored by an intellectual elite convinced that identity voting is irrational and primitive, despite its ubiquity in 'established' democracies. This emphasis on identity must be clarified. Stephen Friedman (2005:5) points to the fact

that identity denotes ‘a social self-definition based on criteria other than socioeconomic interest, on common “webs of meaning”. The chief rationale for voter choices is who voters believe they are and their assessment of which party can best provide a vehicle for who they are’. Thus, black voters may vote for the ANC even if they lack jobs or housing, because this party symbolises for them struggle for freedom and dignity. Although Friedman criticises the view that identity-based voting is similar to racial or ethnic censuses, he does point to a significant problem that this type of voting poses for effective governance:

The key point is that, in this context, weighing the programs and policies of parties plays hardly any role. (...) An electoral politics based on identity can weaken government accountability and responsiveness where one identity dominates and where one party, in this case the ANC, can project itself as the dominant vehicle of that identity. (2005:5)

Affirming one’s identity seemed a crucial aspect of political life both for voters in the quantitative part of our study, and for the non-voters interviewed for this research.

Conclusions

This paper challenges the three components of the apathy argument in explaining voter abstention: that non-voters are apathetic and indifferent, that apathy is about their personal disinterest in politics and lack of political engagement, and that in this apathy they differ from voters.

First of all, this paper shows that there is a great variety of possible reasons for abstention as identified in interviews with non-voters in the 2014 South African election, ranging from logistic obstacles on one extreme (where respondents would have liked to vote but were prevented from doing so), to abstention as a form of active boycott of electoral politics, on the other. The fact that of the 25.39 million potential voters who made the effort to register, only 18.65 million actually voted, suggests that it cannot be all about being uninterested and apathetic.

Being uninterested in elections could be considered a rational and explainable (if not legitimate) behaviour in the situation of post-apartheid disappointment with electoral politics. Although some form of dissatisfaction was witnessed in most interviews, it seems to reflect a political position, rather than lack of interest in politics.

And thirdly, despite a great variety of responses, interviewed non-voters gave surprisingly similar answers to voters in terms of their political views. In answering the question ‘Who would you vote for if you did vote?’ the majority responded ‘The ANC’ despite persuasive criticism of party leadership and recent policies. The second most common answer to this question by voters and non-voters alike was ‘Either the EFF or the DA because I want change’. These voting preferences mirror election results, with ANC, DA and EFF coming up as three leading parties. They also prove the strong role of identity politics in South Africa.

A small number of interviews and geographical limitations prevent us from making any far-reaching conclusions that would be representative of all non-voters in South Africa. Nevertheless, some of the findings point to interesting tendencies that merit further research. For instance, non-voters interviewed were somewhat more willing to offer their support to other parties, while ANC support was not as overwhelming. These responses may serve as an illustration of Mattes’ observation quoted above, whereby despite a lack of significant differences between voters and non-voters, a lower turnout means in the South African context better outcomes for the ANC, although further research needs to be carried out to investigate this hypothesis. Another interesting observation is that among our respondents apathy was identified as a reason why others may abstain (in particular the youth), but not a common explanation as to why a respondent chose not to vote. This could be due to media influence and widespread stereotypes of young people being uninterested and apathetic. The transmission of such stereotypes and their impact on voting behavior could be a focus of further studies.

Notes

1. For example, Jessica Piombo (2005:256) provides a much more nuanced typology of reasons for declining registration rates, that include ‘inability to get to a registration point, lack of the proper identity document, confusion about the registration process and probably disinterest’.
2. A drawback in the way questions X6_2 and X6_3 were asked is that only those respondents who said ‘yes’ to the question on registration (X6_1) were asked the following two questions. However, even those who were not registered yet in 2013 might have been planning to register later and to vote. Furthermore, even if they were not registered, and not planning to vote, they should have still been asked for reasons for abstaining.

3. It is possible to vote anywhere for the national poll, but in the provincial poll (which was done simultaneously) one has to be in their home province. However, many of our respondents were not aware of this and thought they could not vote at all if they were not in their home province.
4. 'Born free' is a description of the young people who were born after the end of apartheid and first democratic elections in 1994. These young people currently constitute about 40 per cent of South Africa's population.
5. Mattes quotes results of the Ipsos-Markinor survey carried out in December 2013, where only 53 per cent of potential voters supported the ANC, but once voter turnout was taken into account this percentage rose to 65 per cent in a low turnout scenario.
6. Kasrils has not insisted on the boycott, but rather suggested a vote for a smaller party, but some of the respondents perceived this campaign to be about boycotting elections altogether.

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Field notes

Election day research field notes. Alexandra, May 7, 2014.

Election day research field notes. Bekkersdal, May 7, 2014.

Election day research field notes. KwaThema, May 7, 2014.

Election day research field notes. Noordgesig, May 7, 2014.