VOTER PARTICIPATION FACTORS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS: INFLUENCES AND PROPOSITIONS FOR VOTER EDUCATION.

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ABSTRACT

Legitimate democracy relies on the widespread public participation in the election process. Voter participation is dependent on voter registration. Voters should indicate from a very early date determined by government their intention to participate in the voting process through a legitimate registration. The article reports findings of a study that investigated factors influencing voter participation in the registration towards the 2016 South African Local Government Elections in South Africa using the case of Mankweng community. The article argues that there is a need for voter education in South Africa before the actual election process take place. This is to increase a unified perception about the value of voter participation on democracy performance. The study applied a mixed method approach in which a sequential exploratory strategy was applied to data collection and analysis. The Mankweng Township within the Polokwane Local Municipality serves as a unit of analysis. Findings of the study revealed mixed perceptions amongst the variety of participants view on participation in the 2016 elections. This has indicated dichotomies amongst age groups and social statuses, about voting and participation significance in the current democratic dispensation in South Africa.

Keywords: *Democracy, Democratic dispensation, Local Government Elections, voter registration*

1. INTRODUCTION

Voter participation in local government elections is seen as an important measurement of the quality of elections and representation, democratic stability, civic and political culture of a country (Asante, 2014). According to Reynolds (2012: x), voting in elections by citizens is very much encouraged in all democracies as it is the basis of democracy and citizenship. A high turnout is therefore seen as a symbol of higher participation in decision making and a seal of approval or legitimacy of elections. In Ghana the introduction of the decentralization policy with the district assembly concept seeks to involve citizens at grassroots to participate in governance by playing a major role in decision making. It is for this reason that voter turnout at the District Level Elections are very relevant (Reynolds, 2012: x).

According to Iseghohime (2009:18), in other developing African countries, clientelism is common in political par-

ticipation as most people are poor and struggle to survive. Such people are very loyal and submissive to their patrons who do assist them in various ways, but control their votes, this can influence registration turnout of voters or citizens.

Looking at the previous local government elections, Gouliamos, Theocharous and Newman (2013:103) posit that the reason behind most of young people not registering in the 1995 local government elections was the lack of identity documents and probably political involvement. However, Pallister (2013:1) indicates that there are various factors that pose varying obstacles to participation, amongst others, the provision of voter education, mechanisms of casting a ballot, the distance voters must travel to reach a polling place as well as the differences in the requirements for voters' registration.

Therefore, since voter turnover is influenced by various factors, it is essential that the factors influencing voter participation on local government elections be investigated and possible strategies be tackled. The aim of the study was to investigate the factors influencing voter participation in registration towards the 2016 South African Local Government elections.

This is done by finding the factors from various age groups, identifying perceptions of citizens towards local government elections, determining their awareness of local government issues and the forthcoming elections and recommending options to inspire voter participation in the local government elections.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Local government in South Africa

During the apartheid era, local government had racial segregations, financial constraints, protesting against a distorted system, and an incomplete transition. However, it does not mean that there are no longer financial constraints in South Africa currently. The South African local government currently comprises of different municipalities in which each municipality has unique different challenges.

There are Metropolitan Councils with Metropolitan Local Councils, district councils, transitional local councils, and rural councils (White Paper on Local Government, 1998). Powell (2012:11) states that the South African society is shaped by a larger political and economic forces, cleavages and problems; therefore, local government is seen as a mirror of the national government.

White Paper on Local Government (1998) indicates that as the basis for a democratic, integrated, prosperous and truly non-racial society, local government has to play its critical role in rebuilding local communities and environments. It must also promote the Bill of Rights which reflects the nation's values about human dignity, equality and freedom, and uphold the principles enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996.

Van der Waldt, Venter, Van der Walt, Phutiagae, Khalo and Van Niekerk (2007:17) indicate that local government in South Africa is the closest to the people, and as such renders the bulk of services aimed at achieving a healthy socio-economic and political environment. It comprises of municipalities which help to deliver a wide variety of services.

2.2 The importance of local government elections

According to Alexander and Kane-Berman (2014:4) in local government elections, councilors are elected after every five years. Gallet in Bona magazines (2016:74) wrote that Jolene Steyn Kotze, an associate professor of Political studies at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University said that, "thirty years ago, the colour of our skin determined which jobs and resources you could assess.

Now that we have a choice of political parties and their actions for our lives, and we need to protect our inherent right to make choices, regardless of our identity or social class". Nyalunga (2006) indicates that the majority of South Africans were excluded from owning land in urban areas, employment, education, health and other basic services as a result of a system that was inherited by democratically elected government which aimed at providing quality services for a racially defined, privileged minority. According to Nkala (2014:4) elections serve as a pivotal instruments designed to express and simultaneously reinforce

the principles (representation, equality and participation) on which democracy is founded.

2.3 Local government elections and voter participation

According to Booysen (2012:1), one of the strongest expressions of the locals in South Africa is the concentration of politics around local government elections. Local elections are the lens through which it takes sense to view the politics of the coalface, the interface between citizens and government. Heywood (2013:196) indicates that elections are often thought of as the heart of the political process. Heywood (2013:203) further posits that elections are portrayed as the very heart of democracy by some thinkers. According to Africa (2013) elections in South Africa have become institutionalized.

There is a well-established electoral regulatory framework, electoral machinery and a culture of election observation in South Africa. It is further stated by (IDEA ,2007) in Reynolds (2012: xvi) that in terms of functions, elections serve the following purpose; educating voters, building of the legitimacy of leaders and the government in power, a function that is performed to some extent even by elections that are non-competitive or undemocratic, and strengthening elites.

Pallister (2013:10) indicates that because of more unclear information and a longer journey at a less convenient time, to complete a more complicat-

ed procedure, registration is usually seen more difficult than voting. In various countries there are reforms such as same day registration and later registration dates which seek to reduce the difficulties to voting posed by registration (Ansolabohere and Konisky 2004).

According to Madlala (2016) public participation through local government elections in many instances is perceived as an end in itself, where-by local citizens cast their votes and expect those they have elected to deliver on the voter's expectations and for candidate or political parties manifestos. It is further stated that the public participate in local government firstly by voting in municipal elections and secondly, by exercising their right to be involved in the running of the municipality, being aware of the municipality's plans for development, knowing who their ward councillor is and how to contact him or her (corruption watch,2016).

2.4 The importance of voter registration and participation

Mcebisi (2014:161) indicates that there is a need to stress the importance of registering to vote from the early date prior to when voter registration is no longer an option because a legitimate democracy relies on a widespread public participation in the election process and the importance of voting.

The reasons for citizens to register and vote in the voting district of ordinary residence are; to assist the Electoral Commission with efficient administrative planning of elections and to ensure that voters do not vote more than once in an election (Municipal Elections Report, 2011). Booysen (2012:2) indicates that the relationship between government performance and voting on the local government level in South Africa is not one-to-one, yet it is a closer, more direct and exposed, relationship than what exists on the levels of national and provincial elections.

The hearts and minds of the people of South Africa are shown to a more extent in the local than in comparable national spaces. Christensen and Hogen-Esch (2014:213) also indicate that in a democracy, voters should be the most important influence on government, yet in local politics their interest and participation are often lamentably low.

According to Bowman and Kearney (2016:85) registration matters because in most instances people who are registered are likely to vote and votes translate into political power. Thus, groups anxious to increase their electoral clout will launch registration drives among their membership. Nkala (2014:4) indicates that elections and participation are organically linked and the existence of each depends on the existence of the other.

2.5 Registration procedures and requirements

Mistra-Dexter and February (2010:176) indicate that according to the Constitution of South Africa (1996) and the Electoral Act no 18 0f 2013, voter

registration procedures and election procedure are the sole responsibility of the IEC, although parties themselves lead voter registration drives. According to the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa (2016) citizens can apply for registration during office hours at the local Electoral Commission office responsible for their voting district, or register to vote on special registration days often called registration weekends.

If citizens moved, they must then go back to a registration point and fill in a form to change registration details. According to Municipal Elections Handbook (2016), when a citizen applies to register as a voter the procedure involves: filling in a paper application form, Identity Document will be scanning and a barcoded sticker will be pasted in the ID or temporary identity certificate.

If a citizen will be registering with a smartcard ID, then separate form will be provided to paste the barcoded sticker which serves as a proof of application to register. However, if a citizen has completed a form and received a barcoded sticker or receipt does not mean they are registered. It will take at least seven working days to process the application.

Williams (2010: 125) states that in 1999 elections, it was required that every eligible voter register prior to election day, two days were set for registration to occur. For the success of this process, necessary rules and guidelines to those living in rural areas were communicated by chieftaincy structures on behalf of the government, it was also to hep mobilize the people to register and then vote.

For this process to be successful in the rural areas, the government relied upon the chieftaincy structures to communicate the necessary rules and guidelines to those living in their areas and to help mobilize people to register and then to vote. According to Mcebisi (2014:194) South African voters have to register at their voting stations in order for them to vote. In order to register, an individual is req

uired to: be a South African citizen with a South African bar-coded ID, be over 18 years of age and be ordinarily resident in the district where he/she is registering.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used the mixed method to collect and analyse data, following the sequential exploratory strategy. Qualitative research was conducted first in order to create quantitative questions. Interviews were conducted from 20 members of the communities within Mankweng Township and data analysed to create questionnaires. Questionnaires were distributed to 60 members of the same communities (Unit C and G).Non-probability sampling was used where participants were handpicked from the communities. The study investigated voter participation and factors in the South African Local Government Elections. In the study, respondents were required

through interviews and questionnaires to respond to as to whether they are registered voters or not, whether they had an understanding of Local Government Election knowledge, the role of Local Government, the importance of Local Government Elections, Why people should vote, the kind of government to vote for and what inspires people to vote. The results of their perceptions are presented hereunder:

3.1 Registration status

Orford (2011) indicated that the social factors that influence whether a person votes in an election are quite well known and do not vary much between the different types of elections or through time. Generally, turnout is larger in areas that have older and retired people, that have people who are more educated and are in professional or managerial occupations. According to Wang and Kim (2010:12) important variables that may describe the voting and registration gap include: socioeconomic status, lack of mobilization in these communities, the types of community in which the citizen resides, language issues, and administrative

discrimination. Bowman and Kearney (2016:81) agrees that one explanation for nonparticipation in politics is socioeconomic status. The respondents were required to confirm their registration status for the 2016 Local Government Elections in South Africa on the questionnaire. The results of the figure below shows that the majority of the respondents were not registered for

the 2016 Local Government Elections in South Africa from the Mankweng Community. A disturbing issue about this is that the majority of those not registered are the youthful group at the ages of 18-30.

Figure 1: Registration Status

53% of the participants indicated that they did not register to vote and then 47 % indicated that they registered to vote. This becomes a problem to the democracy of the country because, the government will deliver the wrong services to wrong people and there will always be protest because people do not participate in the local elections or local issues at large. However, it cannot be concluded that they do not want participate without having clear reasons for that. Thus this article investigated the factors influencing voter participation particularly in the local government elections.

Participants indicated that some of the reasons for not participating in the local government elections is that they are not interested in politics, because of long queues that they have to stand when registering to vote, poor service delivery in their communities and that some did not have knowledge of local government elections and they

were not aware of the registration. It is important for people to understand what local government elections are, why is it important to have them and the role that local governments play, particularly those people that are being voted for in the local government elections.

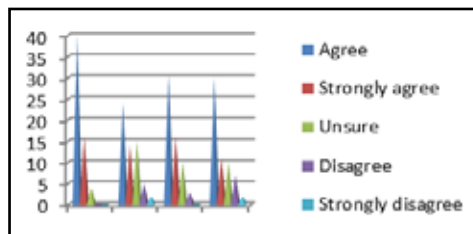## 3.2. *Understanding of local government elections*

According to Orford (2011) the rate of turnout is prominently influenced by the political context of an election. People who live in safe seat areas are less likely to vote than in those where there is a close contest between politicians so called marginal seats.

This can be very striking in local elections where local councillors compete for seats in small areas called electoral wards. This may be as a result of politicians campaigning harder in the ward if the elections are nearby, encouraging and reminding people to go out and vote for them. Britain, parliament, House of Commons, Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (2014: 7) indicate that people's feeling to vote and also their likelihood to be registered to vote in the first place are affected by several factors. These include political disengagement and dissatisfaction; the value of voting and concerns about where the power lies. The respondents were required to indicate their understanding and their attachment of value to Local Government Elections.

The figure below shows that respon-dents provided various responses in relation to how they view Local Government Elections in South Africa.

Figure2: Understanding local elections

About 67% agrees, (27%) strongly agree, (7%) is unsure, (0%) disagrees, and another (0%) strongly disagree that local government elections is about electing councillors. On the second statement that local government elections are about ensuring people's needs are met, (40%) agrees, (23%) strongly agree, (25%) is unsure, (8%) disagrees and (3%) strongly disagrees.
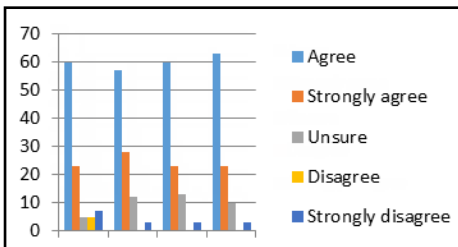
On the statement of local government elections is about the process of participation within democracy, 47% agrees, 25% strongly agrees, 15% is unsure, 10% disagrees and 3% strongly disagree. On the last statement indicating that local government is about deciding who runs the local councils, (52%) agrees, (27%) strongly agree, (17%) is unsure, (5%) disagrees and 0% strongly disagrees.

3.3. The importance of local government elections

Abbott and Hetzel (2010:359) indicate

that the low registrations and resulting low voter turnout could be attributed to the time and expense of appearing twice in order to vote. Another problem was the lack of information surrounding the voting stations. Pallister (2013:1) indicates that there are various factors that pose varying obstacles to participation, amongst others, the provision of voter education, mechanisms of casting a ballot, the distance voters must travel to reach a polling place as well as the differences in the requirements for voters' registration. According to Jones, Jones, Woods, Whitehead, Dixon and Hannah (2014) the mapping of voting behaviour is one of the oldest elements of political geography. Voting patterns differ spatially and there is a relationship between these and the spatial distribution of other social and economic entities. The respondents were required to tell if they understand the importance of Local Government Elections. The responses from the figure below shows that people have different perceptions of the importance of Local Government Elections.

Figure 3: The importance of local elections

The diagram above shows that 60 % of the population agrees that the importance of local government elections is to choose citizens or representatives from the community, 23% strongly agrees, 5% is unsure, another 5% disagrees and 7% strongly disagree. 57% of the population agrees that the importance of local government elections is to allow people to contribute to and be involved in their local communities, 28% strongly agrees, 12% is unsure, 0% disagrees and 3% strongly disagree.

The results further show that 60% of the population agrees that it is important to have local government elections in order to be able to hold municipalities to account in the provision of services, 23% strongly agrees, 13% is unsure, 0% disagrees and 3% strongly disagree. Participants further continue to show by 63% that they agree that local government elections ensure that democracy rests on the right shoulder and 23% strongly agree, 10% is unsure, 0% disagrees and 3% strongly disagrees.
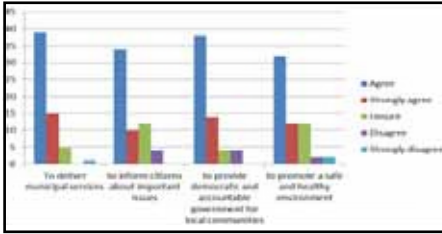
3.4 The role of local government

The roles of local government according to respondents in the study are: to deliver municipal services; to inform citizens about important issues in the communities; to provide a democratic and accountable government for local communities and to promote a healthy and safe environment.

The respondents provided varying perceptions as to what can be perceived as the role of local government.

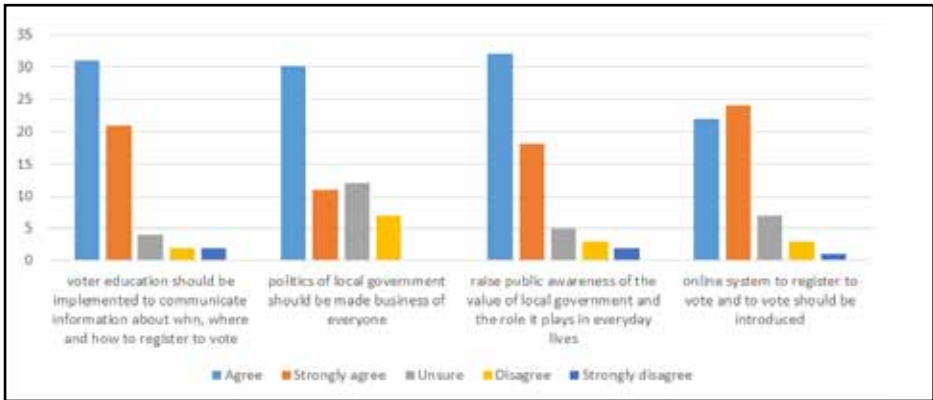**Figure 4:** The role of local government

A higher percentage of 65% agrees, 25% strongly agree, 8% is unsure, 0% disagree and 2% strongly disagree to the statement that states that the role of local government is to deliver municipal services. 56% agrees, 17% strongly agrees, 20% is unsure, 7% disagrees and 0% strongly disagrees with the statement that indicates that the role of local government is to inform citizens about important issues. In the statement that posits that the role of local government is to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities, 63% agrees, 23% strongly agrees, 7% is unsure and another 7% disagrees. 53% agrees, 20% strongly agrees, another 20 % is unsure, 3% disagrees and 3% strongly disagrees that the role of local government is to promote a safe and healthy environment.

3.5. *Options to inspire voter participation in local government elections*

According to Blais et al, 2004 in Orford (2011) voting in elections is an important political and social issue. There are many factors determining whether a person will vote in an election. These include social factors, political factors and geographical factors. Wang and Kim (2010:12) state that most of the literature on political participation to date has focused on the gap in voter turnout, rather than the divergence in voter registration. Registration plays a central role in the nativity gap in turnout, and the factors of voting apply to the probability of voter registration as well. Options to inspire voters' participation included the following, voter education should be implemented to communicate information about when, where and how they should register to vote and vote; politics of local government should be made business of everyone; public awareness should be raised about the value of local government and role it plays in everyday lives and online system to register to vote and vote should be introduced.

Figure 5: Options to inspire voters' participation in local government elections.

A higher percentage (52%) agrees that voter's education should be implemented to communicate information about when, where and how to register to vote. 50% agrees that politics of local government should be made business of everyone. The issue to raise public awareness of the value of local government and the role it plays in everyday lives; a higher percentage of the population is agreed at (53%). 42% of the respondents indicated that online system to register and to vote should be introduced.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article revealed that the IEC has indeed introduced the voters' education, however, the teams are not effective as the public may realise that during or before the elections. Most respondents showed that they do not value the election processes for a variety of reasons. Such reveals that voter education done is not sufficient across the country about the voting processes. This study therefore recommend the following:

People in various communities should be taught about how local government works; we should be able to follow the proper protocol when the issues arise. Therefore, the IEC team for voters' education should always be active.

- Local government issues should be the matter of every citizen because it is put in power by citizens' votes.

- Voting stations should be opened for the whole months before the 3 months of elections so that people can be given enough time to go and register to vote and IEC people should go door to door not only for people who are disabled or sick but rather for

everyone because some people are just lazy to walk to the voting stations.

- The government should provide people with what they need, for people to vote there must be improvement in our places, jobs must be provided.

- It can also be recommended that councillors should have enough time to spend with the citizens in the communities in which they serve to listen to their needs and this should be done on regular basis not only by the time of elections.

- Municipalities should ensure that the needs of citizens should be met; they should provide basic services such as water, sewage removals, municipal health service and street lights particularly in rural areas.

In conclusion, in order to ensure increase in voters' registration, it should be considered that the key pillars that influence voters to participate in local government elections registrations be addressed. The different factors should be addressed differently since they also differ. It is of paramount importance that citizens should be made aware of positive effects of participation in elections, through educating learners at an early age at school; this could stimulate youth participation in elections. Every citizen has the right to vote and voters' participation could contribute to the improvement of the country. In local government elections, that is where citizens are given a chance to vote for the people who they feel will look after their service delivery interests such as water, electricity streets lights and etc. therefore, it is essential that citizens participate in the local government elections. Councillors should also take it in mind that they should be close to the citizens because many people complain about councillors only coming to them when they are campaigning towards elections.

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