

Punching below their weight: YOUNG SOUTH AFRICANS' RECENT VOTING PATTERNS

Tracking young people's election participation is one way of shedding light on the degree to which youth are choosing to engage with society and the national values embedded in the political system. *Duncan Scott, Mohammed Vawda, Sharlene Swartz and Arvin Bhana* present findings from work done for the most recent South African Status of Youth Report aimed at identifying key developmental issues facing young people between 14 and 35 years old.

The latest South African Status of Youth Report commissioned by the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) focuses on issues identified in the National Youth Policy 2009 – 2014 for policy intervention. Taking these intervention areas as a starting point, the HSRC contributed four chapters to the Status of Youth Report. One of these, Social Cohesion and Civic Participation, focused in part on young people's involvement in local and general elections between 2006 and 2011. Drawing on voting data collected by the South African Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), this article describes four phenomena that have characterised the voting patterns of South African youth aged 18 to 34 over the past two municipal elections (2006 and 2011) and the most recent national election (2009). Though it is recognised globally that voter turnout is consistently lower in local than in national elections, data from the

2009 national election is included here to give a broad overview of young people's participation in elections over a six-year period. We do not compare the different types of elections directly.

The majority of registered voters are young

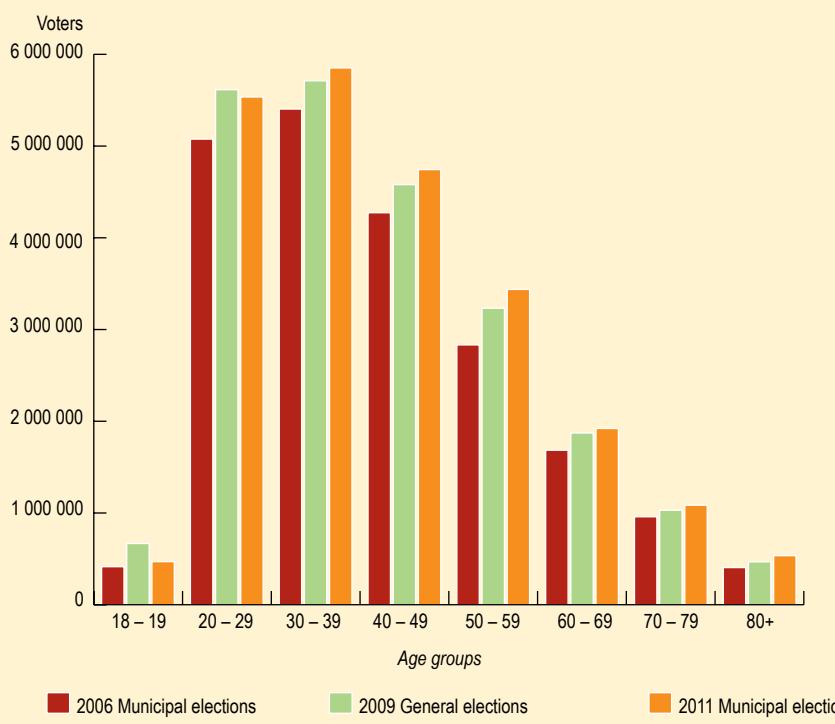
The first of these phenomena to emerge is that in each of the last three elections, young South Africans constituted the two largest blocs of registered individuals. Furthermore, a year-on-year increase in registered 30 to 39-year-olds, which is an 8.3% gain from 5.40 million in 2006 to 5.85 in 2011, reflected the sustained rise in registration numbers observed across most age groups.

The 20 – 29 group also followed this trend and in 2011 there were 9% more registered South Africans in that age group (5.53 million) than in 2006 (5.08 million), as Figure 1 shows.

Youth voter registration remains stagnant

Despite this rise in voter registration numbers among youth, an appraisal of the mid-year 2011 population estimates (Statistics South Africa, 2011) reveals a second phenomenon, namely that the 2011 voters' roll for 20 to 29-year-olds represented only slightly more than 58% (1% higher than in 2006) of the country's 20 to 29-year-old population. Similarly, a comparison with mid-year population estimates in 2011 shows that just 76.6% (4% lower than in 2006)

Figure 1. Estimated voter registration by age group: 2006 – 2011



Source: IEC (2006, 2009, 2011)

>> Punching below their weight:
YOUNG SOUTH AFRICANS' RECENT VOTING PATTERNS (continued)

Figure 2. Voter turnout of different age groups as a percentage of total voting age population

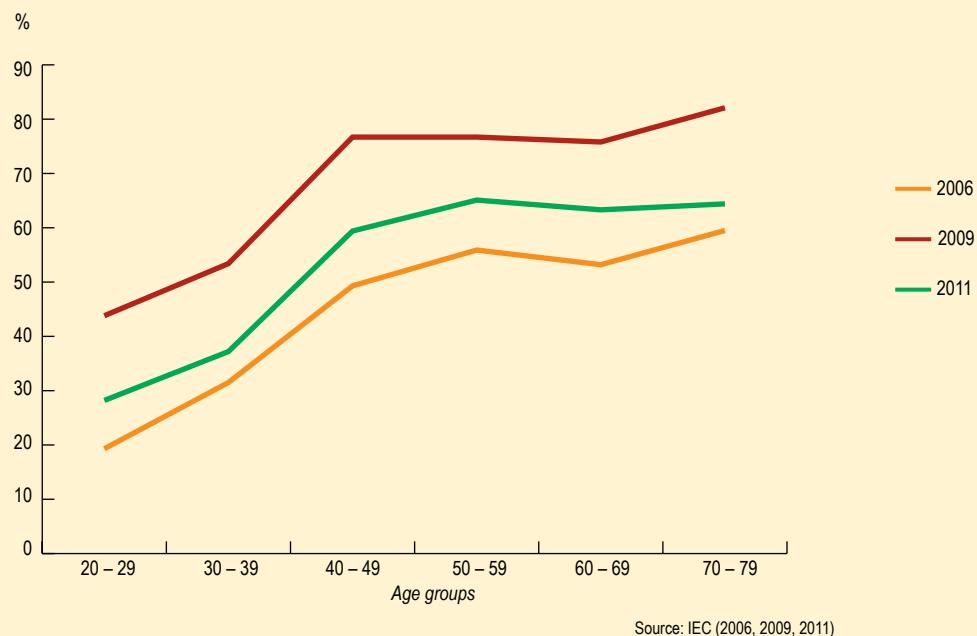
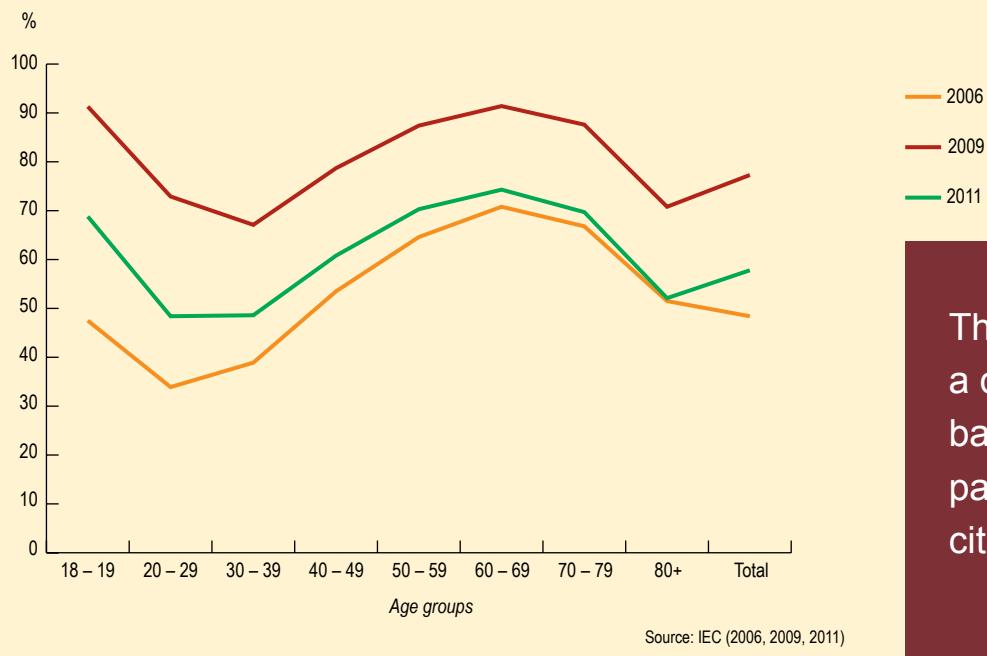


Figure 3. Turnout of age groups as a percentage of registered voters: 2006 – 2011



of 30 to 39-year-olds registered to vote. In contrast, a registration rate of more than 90% is observed in the 40 to 49-year-old age group in 2006, 2009 and 2011. In summary, electoral data from the three most recent countrywide elections show that though voters' rolls have increased over the 2006 to 2011 period, the proportion of South African youth who register to vote has, in real terms, changed very little.

Less than half the country's youth voted

This comparatively low level of young people's electoral involvement is even more starkly rendered when considering the voter turnout for the 2011 municipal elections as a proportion of the country's population as a whole: only 28% of the country's total 20 to 29-year-old population

participated in elections, as indicated by Figure 2. Correspondingly, only 37% of the 30 to 39-year-old group voted in 2011. The third phenomenon to emerge, therefore, is that the 20 to 29 and 30 – 39 age groups, incorporating the South African youth contingent, have over the past three countrywide elections shown the lowest levels of real participation in proportion to the total population estimate for each group.



The vitality of
a democracy is
based on the active
participation of its
citizens



©Eva-Lotta Jansson – Africa Media Online

Persistently low voting rates among the youth

The fourth phenomenon relates to the participation in elections of youth registered on the voters' roll. Remarkably, young people's turnout on Election Day itself shows the opposite trend to the registration numbers described in Figure 1. Figure 3 illustrates how, apart from the 80+ age group in the 2009 national elections, registered voters aged 20 to 29 years old and 30 to 39 years old have been least likely to participate on Election Day. In line with international trends, the most recent national elections drew notably more voters than the 2006 and 2011 municipal elections. However, only 72.9% of registered 20 to 29-year-olds and 67.1% of 30 to 39-year-olds voted in 2009; the proportion of these age groups were both lower, therefore, than the approximate national average of 77%. In 2011, the situation was similar when the turnouts of the 20 to 29 and 30 to 39 groups were both

more than 9% lower than the estimated national average of 58%. Regardless of the differences in national and local elections, with the exception of 18 to 19-year-olds, young voters are regularly less likely actually to turn out on Election Day than other age groups.

The most striking implication of these findings is that researchers and policy makers will need to address in depth the issue of low levels of electoral participation amongst youth. This is especially relevant when considering that young people aged 18 to 35 constitute a substantial proportion of the South African population. Since the vitality of a democracy is based on the active participation of its citizens, examining young South Africans' voting patterns provides a focal point for future research into the perceived legitimacy of the political system itself. Exploring questions such as 'What motivates young people to vote?' and 'Do youth today perceive election participation to

be as relevant as it was when the country held its first fully democratic elections in 1994?' will contribute to gaining an understanding of the ways in which contemporary South African youth interact with society and the issues that animate it. Figure 3 illustrates how the 18 to 19 age group had a consistently high voter turnout over the 2006 – 2011 period. The outcome of future research that foregrounds the questions mentioned above should contribute to interventions that seek to inculcate enthusiasm among these new voters. Nurturing young people's engagement as citizens and early political participation should also contribute to developing a constitutional connectedness within society, traditionally exemplified by the voting process.

Authors: Duncan Scott, researcher; Mohammed Vawda, researcher; Prof. Sharlene Swartz, research director; and Prof. Arvin Bhana, executive director, Human and Social Development, HSRC.