




Chapter 4

Influencing Voter Turnout: Analysing the IEC's Stakeholder Communication Strategy in the 2021 Local Government Elections

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The Independent Electoral Commission is a Chapter 9 institution tasked with all responsibilities related to voter education and communication in South Africa and is thus a key public institution. The right to vote is protected by the institution, given South Africa's political past, which politically excluded a significant majority of the population. The decreasing voter turnout is therefore of great public concern, with record lows in the numbers of voters casting their ballots for the local government elections of 2021. These local government elections were contentious for numerous reasons, including the limitations on electioneering due to COVID-19 regulations (Mokoena, 2021).

As the custodian of free and fair elections in South Africa, the role of the IEC is pivotal to the evaluation of the low voter turnout for the 2021 local government elections. Citizens who are eligible to vote – meaning those 18 years of age or older – have been showing up in steadily declining numbers at the polls, raising questions about some of the possible reasons for their absence, as well as the democratic implications thereof. Eligible voters, who are key stakeholders of the IEC, need to see the value for them personally of exercising their right to vote, and this should be conveyed through a clear and consistent communication strategy. Stakeholder engagement is a key pillar of the IEC, requiring good faith in its communication to balance the power inequalities among various stakeholders,

especially the citizens as voters. Digital and social media have helped to shift the stakeholder engagement relationship, moving the power of communication into the hands of recipients (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013), such as potential voters.

The fourth industrial revolution (4IR) has been hailed as a great enabler of inclusion and participation for stakeholder communication and engagement. The South African public sector has pursued an e-government strategy to increase its reach and optimally use the limited resources to communicate the government's service delivery efforts. The evolution of the IEC's communication strategy to digitally led strategic communication activities has had some implications because of the increased integration of digital communication. Developing countries such as South Africa struggle to deliver basic community services such as running water, electricity and healthcare, which tend to be considered a higher priority than the technological integration of 4IR (Kayembe & Nel, 2019). Internet access is critical for meaningful participation in the 4IR and yet Africa's low internet penetration persists even as the United Nations in 2011 declared internet access as a catalyst for the enjoyment of human rights (Salway, 2020).

South Africa's national estimated rate of internet access has increased dramatically from 28% to 78% through various means, including access at places of work and study, public access points or internet cafes (Lewis, 2023). However, the internet penetration rate in South Africa is evidence of the geographical and technological urban/rural divide and the digital connectivity divide, defined along the lines of economic affordability. In rural South African households, an estimated 1% of households have internet access, compared to 17% of urban households, a gap that has been linked to affordability (Lewis, 2023). As one of the most unequal societies in the world, South Africa has some of the highest data costs – in some instances double those of neighbouring countries (Mwareya & Simango, 2023). The introduction of digital channels for public sector engagement has seemingly also not considered the full implications of the digital generational

divide and media consumption preferences of diverse stakeholders, such as those of the IEC.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the public sector's reliance on digital technologies to maintain social distance, and the government aimed to quickly increase its public communication reach. South Africa's 2021 local government elections took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with preparations delayed because of the third wave of the virus (Mokoena, 2021). The declaration of the voting date – ultimately, 1 November – was delayed because of the COVID-19 behavioural imperatives hampering ordinary campaigning by political parties to their supporters. In April 2021, the parliament's Portfolio Committee on Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs raised concerns with the IEC in respect to readiness and committee members advocated for the postponement of the 2021 local government elections (Gerber, 2021). The IEC stated to the committee at the time that a postponement of the 2021 local government elections would be unconstitutional and raise legitimacy issues for elected councillors due to the end of their terms (Gerber, 2021). Yet, in July 2021, the IEC petitioned the Constitutional Court for a postponement over concerns of low voter turnout (Njilo, 2021).

Consistent, sustained public communication is critical for the IEC to reach some of the most marginalised South Africans, who are often reliant on free public media resources, particularly in relation to their meaningful participation in voting. Past public communication campaigns by the IEC included voter education via television programmes (e.g. *Khululeka* on SABC), roadshows and other communication strategies that were designed to reach as many South Africans as possible (Malada, 2015). The question of meaningful participation in the voting process in South Africa, where the cost of data is prohibitive (Harrisberg & Mensah, 2022), particularly in the face of the IEC's increased reliance on digital communication technologies, merits evaluation in terms of the public communication landscape. This chapter analyses articles from mainstream media and research sources

on the issue of low voter turnout, thematising the key reasons and linking them to the responsibility of the IEC towards citizens as key stakeholders. The chapter argues that limiting IEC communication to periods leading up to the elections – such as for the 2021 local government elections – through a digital-first approach that gives preference to digital channels over traditional media (PMG, 2022) – has had an influence on how citizens understand their role in upholding a healthy democracy through voter participation. The right of all eligible South African citizens to vote may be diluted through limited access to critical information from the IEC because of its limited engagement and digital-first communication strategy.

The Right to Vote

The right to vote is paramount in South Africa, given the past dispensation of segregation where the majority were excluded from participating in the selection of political leaders in the country. The advent of democracy and the first elections held in 1994 stand out in South African history, as does the establishment of the IEC as an independent Chapter 9 institution tasked with the management of free and fair elections in South Africa (IEC, n.d.). The South African political system is a representative democracy where citizens elect political party representatives to represent them in government (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, n.d.); thus, voters select a political party registered with the IEC that will then select its candidates to represent the party at various levels of government, whether national, provincial or local (municipal).

In South Africa, as with other African states, there is a marked age difference between political leaders and their constituencies, with Africa having the youngest median population age in the world (Lubinga & Sitto, 2021). This age gap influences the norms of communicating with voters. A significant part of the IEC's role is to manage elections by ensuring the participation of all stakeholders, including citizens, the media, political parties and civil society (IEC,

n.d.). The IEC must demonstrate impartiality in all its dealings with this diverse set of stakeholders, including being responsive and transparent (see Oksiutycz in this volume on transparency). The various aspects of the IEC's management require clear, concise and intentional communication efforts by the organisation to ensure free and fair elections through knowledgeable citizens voting.

The elections in South Africa include two main events:

- The national and provincial elections, which take place every five years,
- The local government elections, which also take place every five years, two years after the national elections.

In between, there may be by-elections for various reasons including run-offs, the loss of a councillor or reports of election mismanagement (IEC, n.d.).

Local government elections are critical elections as municipalities are the first port of call and closest means of interaction that citizens have with government. Local government elections strengthen democracy and work towards basic service delivery (Mudau, 2021), following the principle of proportional representation and direct election of ward councillors. To ensure good local government elections, engagement needs to take place between the IEC and multiple stakeholders, including legislative bodies and institutions, citizens, political parties and civil society.

Citizens as the IEC's Stakeholders

Communication professionals are tasked with creating value for stakeholders and must consider the socio-economic and generational uses of communication tools to do so effectively. South Africa is a diverse country, made up of citizens from varying backgrounds and socio-economic statuses. In a population of approximately 60 million people in South Africa (Worldometers, 2022), there are 26 039 335 registered voters as at 2023 (IEC, 2022). In 2021 the number of registered voters was approximately 63.9% of the voting age population

(Human Sciences Research Council, 2021). The number of registered voters in 2021 had decreased from 74.6% in 2019 of the voting age population registered to vote (Human Sciences Research Council, 2021). Of those registered voters in 2021, the demographic spread of voters indicates that those in the age groups 18–29 and 60–80 are the least number of registered voters proportionally. The voter registration proportions signify some challenges concerning stakeholder engagement across generational divides, especially with the South African population median age being 27.6 years (Worldometers, 2022).

The focus of stakeholder theory is on the purpose of the organisation and the responsibility it has to stakeholders to develop or create shared value (Freeman, Wicks & Parmar, 2004). Citizen stakeholders are entitled to have input into matters that affect them, beyond the election ballot, and thus have a vested interest in all communication efforts of the IEC, primarily centred on the protection of a free and fair democracy. The challenge for organisations such as the IEC is how to become more creative in developing shared value through their communication strategies to build and maintain citizen-stakeholder relationships – even beyond voting season – to preserve the connection to participatory democracy. Often stakeholders that are treated well tend to respond with positive attitudes and behaviours towards an organisation and its communication. Thus, to balance interests among stakeholders and the organisation, stakeholder engagement needs to be conducted in good faith by organisations such as the IEC. Good faith in stakeholder communication encourages engagement while preserving individual autonomy to pursue self-interest, and while helping to balance power inequalities among stakeholders (Dawkins, 2014). According to Dawkins (2014), good faith is important for meaningful stakeholder engagement and the success of communication, fostering a culture of collectivity, especially where a complexity of interests exists. The IEC is tasked with balancing multiple interests that may not always enjoy mutuality and thus stakeholder engagement needs to be practised in good faith

through strategic communication, requiring the IEC to be reflexive in its communication approach.

The Power Shift in Organisational Communication

Organisations no longer have control in a world where internet-driven communication technologies have empowered stakeholders – more so than ever before – to act as key players in organisational communication. The 4IR, which is expected to be the new normal, has been hailed as a transformative period for organisations, with disruptions that will revolutionise almost all industries (Xing & Marwala, 2017). 4IR-powered technology has been earmarked as a way for organisations to build capacity with minimal need for additional or costly resources. The IEC, as part of the overall public sector e-government strategy, invested in an upgraded website in October 2022. The organisation has also invested time in developing social media accounts on YouTube, Instagram, Twitter (now X) and Facebook (the largest social media network in South Africa) (BusinessTech, 2021). However, across these social media platforms, the number of followers collectively for the IEC as at 2023, did not exceed 700 000, which is a small number compared to the size of the voter registration base, especially when considering the possible reach of these platforms.

The IEC as an organisation is increasingly interacting with their stakeholders online through various channels and platforms, although the digitally connected still represent a small proportion of stakeholders. The official IEC social media hashtag for the local government elections, #LGE2021 brought up numerous results online, with a mixture of commentary from citizens on the performance of the various political parties but limited direct mention of the IEC by social media users. The most notable aspect of the social media accounts for the IEC is the low engagement and interaction with content shared, with comments closed on some videos loaded. The social media strategy of the IEC seems, from the content evaluated, to focus on sharing the various activities of the

organisation primarily through broadcasting, media releases, outcomes of court actions, election outcomes and event live streaming, with limited engagement with online users or responses to direct questions or comments posted by them.

The pattern of use reflects some of the findings with respect to government use of digital media discussed by Sitto et al. (2022), demonstrating that government digital communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic did not make full use of the advantages of engagement through digital media. The IEC seems to experience the strategic communication challenges with their social media activities which Navarro, Moreno and Al-Sumait (2017) discuss with the incorporation of social media into organisational communication strategies, namely:

- limiting engagement – for example, by disabling comments – because of organisational fear of loss of control;
- inappropriate use of channels selected for message dissemination – for example, full media releases shared;
- underinvestment in online time for meaningful engagement;
- not using stakeholder feedback from social media to help improve relations; and
- a lack of proactive engagement for dialogue measurement.

While the power of political parties in the South African voter communication landscape has grown as they use the media to drive their messages to attract voters, the visibility of IEC's public communication strategy has simultaneously diminished across converged media platforms – i.e. a mix of traditional and digital media. A large contributor to the shrinking voice of the IEC on the converged media landscape has been a diminishing budget (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the deep socio-economic inequalities in the country and further extended the digital divide. Even as global internet penetration rates continue to rise, the digital divide in South Africa continues

to widen along socio-economic and urban/rural lines. The internet penetration rate in South Africa remains lower than the global average (Internet World Stats, 2022), with internet access primarily through mobile, using expensive data and concentrated in urban centres (StatsSA, 2019). South Africa's internet connectivity costs are among the highest on the African continent and globally (Kahla, 2019). The digital divide has implications for how different citizen stakeholders access information and thus for how the IEC should approach its strategic communication engagement – including what channels it should use – to deliver on its mandate of reaching the voter base as widely as possible with information to empower citizens to make informed decisions during the elections. The critical role that the IEC plays in South Africa has been disrupted by information communication technologies (ICTs), and thus the influence of the digital divide on the organisation's engagement with citizen stakeholders is key to public communication.

The Role of Strategic Communication for Voter Engagement

Since its establishment, the IEC has made many strides over the years in its work to communicate with citizens about electoral matters. From the strategic use of television shows such as *Khululeka*, an edutainment programme (Barnett, 2002) on the importance of voting and the rights of citizens to on-the-ground community engagements and town hall meetings, the IEC in the past has made efforts to reach as many citizens as possible. The discipline of strategic communication emphasises the focus on *all* the communication activities of the organisation, not only those of communication professionals (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018).

The organogram of the IEC divides the communication responsibilities between the Deputy CEO of Corporate Services, who takes care of ICT – i.e. the digital communication tools of the organisation – and the Deputy CEO of Outreach responsible for communications (IEC, n.d.).

The differentiation of the digital communication tools and channels used to disseminate the messages to be carried on such platforms provides insight into the potential challenges of holistic, purposeful communication by the IEC, beyond planned communication at a specific time, such as the 2021 local government elections. The discipline of strategic communication takes a holistic, deliberate and continuous approach to communication by organisations at various stakeholder levels, beyond the communication function (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018).

The IEC has a responsibility to continuously engage citizen stakeholders to:

- educate, inform and involve citizens;
- update the voters' roll; and
- uphold the right to vote for all citizens through deliberate messaging and communication.

The essence of the practice of strategic communication is being purposeful, meaning decisive with the intent to advance an organisation's mission through communicating (Van Ruler, 2018). The purposeful nature of strategic communication is critical (Hallahan et al., 2007) to organisational success. To maintain the integrity of the electoral process, the IEC needs to be deliberate in its stakeholder engagement practices in a multigenerational and geographically dispersed society such as South Africa. The IEC's main vision is "To be a pre-eminent leader in electoral democracy" (IEC, 2022), which requires purposeful communication, especially during the organisational shock of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the 2021 Local Government Elections

Times of crisis expose acute 4IR inequality challenges. The COVID-19 global pandemic and subsequent response strategies implemented by the South African government were largely reactive to a dynamic health crisis that caught the government underprepared and ill-equipped to cope with its consequences.

The COVID-19 health crisis developed into a socio-economic crisis as the world ground to a halt, nearly crippling economic activity due to lockdowns and movement restrictions (Sitto & Lubinga, 2020). More than half of all South Africans live below the food poverty line, mostly the country's black population (BusinessTech, 2019). The pandemic left the marginalised even more vulnerable as they relied on the government to meet basic needs. Citizens were concerned about meeting their basic needs and the affordability of connectivity slipped further away from the grasp of the majority.

Despite the uncertainty of the direction the COVID-19 pandemic was taking, several political parties and citizens called for the 2021 local government elections to go ahead (Davis, 2020). Local government elections in 2021 were planned to take place in what became the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The Constitutional Court's refusal of the IEC's application to postpone the local government elections in 2021 to give them time to prepare for voter education and readiness significantly challenged the strategic communication options of the organisation. With the COVID-19 regulations focusing on the social distancing imperative, the IEC was forced to consider a largely digital-first communication strategy for the 2021 local government elections, using digital communication technologies more heavily than traditional media, including electronic voter registration (PMG, 2021). Thus, many citizens were left behind, not only through the digital divide but also through a generational divide in the use of digital communication as the IEC increased its digital efforts to target younger voters (PMG, 2021). Different generations engage with digital communication technologies in a variety of ways, including avoidance strategies, as the number of platforms for engagement continues to rise (Rossouw, Rautenbach, Pritchard & Sitto, 2018).

Baby Boomers – those born between 1946 and 1964 – Generation X (1965–1979) and Gen Z (2000–2020) are the generations with the least number of registered voters among them, relative to the overall voters' roll. The largest proportion

of registered voters reside in Gauteng; geographically the smallest province of South Africa's nine provinces that has the largest share of the national population and is a key economic contributor (South African Government, n.d.). For the IEC, the diversity of citizen stakeholders and the low turnout numbers, particularly in the younger segment of eligible voters, point to a challenge in meaningfully conveying to those stakeholders the importance of registering for voting. The multigenerational society in South Africa allows for numerous communication possibilities – as well as challenges – due to the existence of the technological generational divide (Rossouw et al., 2018). The largest influence of the technological generational divide concerns the different levels of familiarity, skills and knowledge of various communication media. The different generations have unique communication preferences, with millennials – born from 1980 to 1999 – enjoying the most technological integration in their lives (Berkup, 2014). This generational digital divide influences the success of engagement with the citizen stakeholder groups.

The Government Communication and Information System's Annual Report for 2020/21 indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic the use of traditional broadcast media, specifically community radio, to reach “population segments in rural and far-flung areas” (GCIS, 2022: 9) of the country became critical to information dissemination. The continued pursuit of an e-government strategy, including by public institutions such as the IEC, continues to be challenged by the socio-economic conditions of the country, specifically the rural/urban and generational digital divide, which was also evident in the responses to – and voter turnout for – the 2021 local government elections. Over time, the IEC's observed communication strategy has centred on elections and outside election periods, on the continuous encouragement of voter registration for eligible individuals – those aged 16 or older – with less focus on a sustained communication strategy of voter education (Malada, 2015).

The IEC has increasingly focused on providing resources and information online through its website and social

media accounts, relying on voters to access the information themselves – even though many experience internet access constraints. The evaluation of media around the performance of the IEC’s communication strategy, through the lens of the 2021 local government elections – admittedly the most technologically advanced elections (Mzekandaba, 2021) – provides some key indicators of the need for reflexivity by this Chapter 9 institution.

Evaluation of Media Coverage of 2021 Local Government Elections

To evaluate the influence of the communication strategy of the IEC during the 2021 local government elections, online searches were conducted specifically considering the keywords ‘low voter turnout South Africa 2021’ and ‘youth vote low in South Africa’, yielding nearly 32 million search results. To evaluate the most relevant online results from various sources, the first page of results was considered for each of these search terms. The main sources of information that were qualitatively and thematically analysed are listed in Table 1.

In total, 15 articles were selected for analysis, drawn from various sources, including national research bodies, mainstream media, alternative local press, international press, independent research agencies and political blog sites from key stakeholders. The articles analysed from these various sources were collated to ensure a balance in the views publicised with respect to voter education among South African youth and the role of the IEC. The analysis of the articles’ content focused on the communicative issues and challenges to meaningful voter participation in the 2021 elections and the low voter turnout, as outlined by various IEC stakeholders.

The articles were analysed by grouping similar information into codes and developing common themes from the codes. Four main themes were identified, with respect to voter participation, especially among the youth during the 2021 local government elections and the IEC’s voter education communication strategies for the local government elections.

Public Sector Communication in the Digital Age

The codes and subsequent themes focused primarily on individual voters' challenges, limited knowledge of the voting system linked to limited voter education channels, and under-appreciation of the significance of voting because of low voter education through a digital-first communication strategy by the IEC.

Table 1: Sources for institutional and media analysis (September 2021–June 2022)

Sources		Total
Government reports	GCIS Annual Report 2021/22 (GCIS, 2022)	1
National media	News24 (Dooms, 2021); EWN (Goodall, 2022); Moneyweb (Runciman & Bekker, 2021); Mail & Guardian (Mbanyele & Desai, 2021)	4
Local media	Daily Maverick (Smillie & Payne, 2021; Davis, 2020); The Conversation (Patel & Graham, 2019)	3
International press	Bloomberg (Cele & Vecchiatto, 2021)	1
Research agencies	Institute for Security Studies (Tracey-Temba, 2016); Human Sciences Research Council (Scott, Vawda, Swartz & Bhana, 2012); ResearchGATE (Bekker, Runciman & Roberts, 2022); Konrad-Adenauer- Stiftung (Bekker & Ruciman, 2022)	4
Blogs	My Vote Counts (2021), Freedom Advocacy Network (Zulu, 2022).	2

Discussion

The thematic analysis of the 15 articles selected on strategic voter communication and voters showing up during the local government elections identified four main themes, outlined in Table 2. This table also describes the implications of the main themes for the IEC's digital-first communication strategy for stakeholder engagement.

Theme 1. Lack of service delivery a demotivator for voting

Public sector communication success is influenced by how citizens perceive the basic tenet of government and its agencies – service delivery. A key theme of the analysis was the lack of motivation to vote because citizens have not experienced a marked change in their lives through service delivery. In addition to service delivery, the perceptions of ageing leaders being out of touch with citizens (Lubinga & Sitto, 2021) plays a crucial role in the outlook of voters, especially younger voters.

Chapter 2 of this volume, which discusses municipalities' use of Facebook, emphasises the inextricable link between how public sector communication is received and the quality of the engagement with citizens as key stakeholders. Citizens are disillusioned with the voting system as they have not experienced changes in the basic services received, with some intimating that whether they vote or not, the ruling party will remain in power. The type of thinking expressed demonstrated a limited understanding by citizens of the connection between voting and service delivery. Citizens did not perceive that an increased number of voters turning up at the polls could have changed the election outcome and that by staying away from the polls, they possibly perpetuated the cycle of low service delivery. The IEC has an important role to play in linking the right to vote with the outcomes of free and fair elections, as well as a healthy democracy, through stakeholder engagement.

Theme 2. Individual voter obstacles to participation

The main reasons documented for poor voter turnout in the articles analysed, especially in the 2021 local government

Table 2: Themes from data analysis on local government elections 2021

Theme	Sub-theme	Implication
Lack of service delivery a demotivator for voting	Disillusionment with the voting system Limited understanding of the link between voting and service delivery	Non-party-affiliated citizens cannot connect voting to the outcome of service delivery and their role in changing the outcome.
Individual voter obstacles for participation	Inability to sign up for the voters' roll in time Physical unavailability to vote on election day Lack of relevant paperwork for voting	As citizens in a democracy, voters are unfamiliar with the voting systems available to them through the IEC.
Limited voter education influencing readiness	Lack of understanding of voting processes Limited voter education leading up to elections	There is little information outside election season from the IEC to aid ordinary citizens on actions to take to be ready to vote.
General youth apathy due to ageing leaders	Age disparity between leaders and voters Little direct communication with newly eligible voters Voter turnout as a sign of protest	Young people are unable to connect with older political leaders and have limited motivation to understand the power of their vote against the democratic implications of staying away from the polls.

elections, were individualistic. Obstacles such as employment constraints, not being registered to vote, or not having the proper identification documentation were the leading reasons individuals gave for not voting in 2021. However, these challenges indicate a limited understanding of the voting process and voter rights. The IEC is responsible for communicating to citizens the various options available to them as voters. These options include applying to cast a special ballot, which allows individuals to cast their ballot on a predetermined day other than election day. All registered voters are eligible to apply for a special vote if they are physically unable to go to their voting station to vote (IEC, 2022). The obstacles for participation indicate an obstacle to information access by voters and thus a lack of strategic communication by the IEC to empower citizens for meaningful election participation.

Stakeholder engagement by the IEC has not been meaningful, nor seemingly, as Dawkins (2014) emphasises, done in good faith to balance power inequalities. Citizens are only eligible to vote if they have an official South African identity document, which requires time and money to acquire from the Department of Home Affairs (DoHA), as well as official proof of residence. Obtaining the relevant documentation proved to be another socio-economic obstacle for voters because of the service delivery challenges associated with obtaining identity documents, especially with limited-service provision by DoHA during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Undeniably, the information on the necessary documentation is available online on the IEC's website. However, in a country with a widening digital divide, the imperative is to use converged media to disseminate such critical information more accessibly ahead of elections on a repetitive basis. COSATU has emphasised the importance of the IEC and the DoHA in educating voters ahead of the 2024 elections to ensure they have the relevant identity documents for meaningful participation (Moche, 2023). With citizens facing socio-economic pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly due to job losses, affordable access to

online information became constrained. That individual voters were not ready for the 2021 local elections is also an indication of the limited direct engagement with them, through various channels, to inform, remind and emphasise critical voting information – repeatedly, through various channels and on an ongoing basis, not only during electioneering.

Theme 3. Limited voter education influencing citizen readiness

The limited information voters have is reflected in their limited understanding of how the voting process works. Many citizens turned up at incorrect voting stations or believed their choice of candidates was limited. The education of voters was left largely to political parties in 2021, most of whom were agitating to hold rallies and other public gatherings, as they were constrained by the COVID-19 National Disaster Regulations prohibiting public gatherings. With limited information on voter rights, citizens could not ready themselves for the elections and demonstrated limited appreciation for the power of their vote in the local government elections, especially given the low turnout in 2021.

The youngest voters have not had the benefit of a public service programme, like *Khululeka*, aimed at educating them on the importance of voting in a thriving, healthy democracy, further entrenching their apathetic attitudes toward voting. Older voters may be disillusioned by the outcomes and constrained by various factors such as limited mobility and poor health. However, the 4IR has shifted the communicative power towards stakeholders, away from organisations, requiring institutions such as the IEC to engage more actively online and offline, through dialogue.

Encouraging dialogue in social media use, as Navarro et al. (2017) highlight, may benefit organisations such as the IEC, which may gain insights through user feedback that can inform stakeholder communication. The most prominent political parties can often afford the media coverage to communicate their election campaign messages, leaving the

IEC to come across as a service provider to political parties, and not the authority on preserving democracy through elections. The IEC has experienced continued budget cuts, constraining its ability to spend on voter education and other key strategic communication activities among citizens, relative to political parties. The South African Parliament, in a media statement (2022), outlined some of the key issues of the impact of IEC budget cuts on a healthy democracy, such as:

- the direct impact on the IEC's ability to run free and fair elections;
- only one registration weekend, as opposed to two in previous election cycles;
- not achieving the target set to register 25 960 000 voters on the voters' roll; and
- the dire need to increase electoral education to ensure citizen participation in the electoral process and democratic processes in general.

With limited resources, voter education through strategic stakeholder engagement activities by the IEC has lagged, reducing levels of voter readiness among South African citizens.

Theme 4. General youth apathy due to ageing leaders

The South African political leadership landscape is made up of ageing leaders within the public sector in key positions. The communication norms and competencies differ across generations, influencing the quality of engagement between citizens and leaders. The leadership of the IEC also requires age diversity to develop more relevant, engaging and timely voter information to young voters, especially as citizens become eligible to vote when they turn 18. The age disparity was a key theme for young voters who found it difficult to connect with older political leaders when looking at their needs as young people in a democratic, metropolitan society. In 2018, the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) estimated that only 6% of members of parliament were under the age of

35. In 2020, the proportion of the population between the ages of 15 and 34 was 63% (Social Progress, 2021).

When considering confidence in the democratic system and young voters' interests, the concerns expressed around the age disparity between leaders and citizens is not unique to South Africa (Lubinga & Sitto, 2021). According to the article analysis conducted for this chapter, young people failed to understand how older leaders would be able to resolve the challenges of young people. This was the case even with leaders who are considered to be 'young'. Without the IEC actively engaging new eligible voters and encouraging them to sign up for the voters' roll, young citizens have limited motivation to understand the power of their vote against the democratic implications of staying away from the polls. Actively engaging new eligible voters cannot happen without targeted strategic communication to young new voters by the IEC as a Chapter 9 institution. However, some of the data indicates that young voters may have remained away from the polls as a form of protest, although that theme was not as prominent as others highlighting shortcomings in voter information and education.

Conclusion

By choosing a digitally led communication strategy, the IEC has, over the years, shifted the responsibility for voter education communication to citizens. This is evident from the IEC's investment in a revamped website and social media channels. The vacuum left by the IEC's voter communication strategy has left citizens largely in the hands of political parties to communicate with them on the ground about elections and voting.

The IEC's pursuit of a digital-first communication strategy, with communication limited to key election periods, and limited stakeholder engagement on the importance of voting in a democracy, leaves large segments of South African citizens – namely Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Z – unmotivated to vote. While the COVID-19 pandemic may have threatened the 2021 local government elections, voter

turnout has been on the decline for the last decade, with 2021 producing the lowest voter turnout to date. A healthy democracy rests on citizen participation, and for citizens to be active, the IEC is tasked with engaging, educating and informing them; a mandate that is not limited to periods leading up to elections only.

The IEC thus needs to re-evaluate its communication strategy as a Chapter 9 institution to ensure a more converged approach to sustained information dissemination through traditional and digital media to reach diverse citizen stakeholders. Voter education in the digital era in South Africa cannot discard previously successful voter education communication strategies using other traditional/mass mediums of communication, including popular culture, but needs to integrate new with old in a manner that ensures maximum voter reach for the IEC's communication messages.

Citizens are key stakeholders and need to have relevant voter information to participate meaningfully towards upholding a healthy democracy in South Africa through various strategic communication efforts. The IEC is a key public institution and needs to adopt strategic communication principles to build up a stronger reputation among voters and improve stakeholder relationships for improved sustained engagement to deliver on its mandate as a pivotal public sector organisation. To reach geographically dispersed citizens of different generations and diverse socio-economic circumstances, the IEC needs to revise its communication strategy to a more converged media approach to ensure good faith and balancing of stakeholder power by purposefully placing stakeholders at the centre of all communication activities.

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