

ELECTORAL REFORM PANEL SUBMISSION

Introduction

As SoWeVote, a youth-led nonprofit organisation dedicated to engaging Gen-Z in the electoral process, we're acutely aware of the challenges facing South Africa's democratic landscape, particularly following the May 2024 elections, which yielded a historically low voter turnout of only 11.6 million people. This alarming statistic reflects a pressing need for reform in our electoral system. The disengagement of such a significant portion of the electorate underscores the barriers many citizens, especially young people, face when trying to participate in the democratic process.

Voting must be made easy and accessible, particularly for the younger generation, who represent the future of our democracy. Research indicates that engaging voters when they are young significantly increases the likelihood that they will remain active participants in elections and the democratic process. Therefore, it is imperative to implement reforms that address the current systemic barriers and inspire and empower young voters to engage meaningfully with their political system.

Why Reform is Necessary

While rooted in the principles of our Constitution, the current electoral framework faces significant challenges that hinder voter participation and the realization of true democratic engagement. By addressing these issues through the proposed reforms, we can ensure a more inclusive, accountable, and transparent electoral system that resonates with our diverse electorate.



Proposed Reforms

1- Voting at Any Station within a Region

Allowing registered voters to cast their ballots at any voting station within their region represents a transformative reform that significantly enhances accessibility and convenience in the electoral process. This proposed amendment to the current electoral framework seeks to address the barriers many voters face, particularly those from younger demographics who may be away from their registered voting locations due to higher education, employment, or other circumstances.

Current research indicates that logistical challenges are a major deterrent to voter participation, especially among younger voters. A report from the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) noted that among the reasons cited for low voter turnout in recent elections, accessibility to polling stations emerged as a key factor. The report highlighted that many eligible voters, particularly students and young professionals, often need help reaching their designated voting stations, resulting in a significant proportion of the electorate being disenfranchised.

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) emphasises that accessibility to polling stations is crucial in fostering democratic participation. Their studies indicate that countries with flexible voting locations tend to experience higher voter turnout rates, particularly among younger populations who value convenience and accessibility in the voting process.

Proposed Policy Amendment

- To enact this reform, we propose an amendment to the Electoral Act that would permit voters to cast their ballots at any designated voting station within their geographical region, contingent upon their registration status. Key components of this amendment include:
 - **Implementation of a Regional Voting System:** Establish clear guidelines defining geographical voting regions, allowing voters to choose any polling station within their assigned area. This would require collaboration between the IEC and local election authorities to ensure a seamless transition and robust implementation.



- **Enhanced Voter Education Campaigns:** Launch comprehensive voter education initiatives to inform the public about the new voting options. This campaign should utilise various social media platforms to reach younger voters effectively.
- **Real-Time Voter Registration Verification:** Develop a secure online system that enables real-time voter registration verification at any voting station through the province's digitised voting roll. This would facilitate a smooth voting process and ensure individuals can vote without unnecessary delays or complications.
- **Increased Training for Election Officials:** Provide thorough training on the new processes and technologies to effectively manage voting at multiple locations. This training will ensure that staff can assist voters efficiently and handle any inquiries related to the regional voting system.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Framework:** Establish a framework to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of this reform. This would include gathering data on voter turnout, demographic engagement, and feedback from voters about their experiences, which can inform future improvements to the electoral process.

Alignment with Constitutional Values

This reform aligns with Section 1 of the Constitution, which promotes democratic governance based on accountability, responsiveness, and inclusivity. By accommodating the mobility of younger voters and removing barriers to access, we uphold the constitutional value of inclusivity and encourage greater participation in the electoral process. This reform is a vital step toward ensuring that all citizens can exercise their right to vote, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of our democratic institutions. Implementing the ability for voters to cast their ballots at any station within their region is a crucial step toward fostering a more inclusive, accessible, and responsive electoral system. This policy amendment will significantly empower younger voters, encouraging them to participate in shaping their future and ultimately strengthening our democracy.



2 - "None of the Above" Option on Ballots

Introducing a "None of the Above" (NOTA) option on ballots represents a significant reform to enhance voter engagement and ensure that all voices are heard in the electoral process. This option would allow voters to express dissatisfaction with the candidates presented, reinforcing the principles of fairness and accountability. We can foster a more inclusive and responsive political environment by acknowledging that only some voters feel represented by the candidates.

Research indicates that many voters feel disenchanting with their political choices. A study by the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) found that a significant portion of the electorate expressed dissatisfaction with existing political parties and candidates. This dissatisfaction often leads to voter apathy and lower turnout rates, as individuals may choose not to vote rather than support candidates they do not believe in.

A NOTA option has been implemented successfully in various democracies worldwide. For example, India adopted a NOTA option in 2013, allowing voters to register their discontent with candidates on the ballot. Subsequent evaluations revealed that the presence of NOTA contributed to greater voter engagement and prompted political parties to reassess their candidate selection processes, striving to present more appealing and representative options to the electorate.

Furthermore, studies conducted by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) indicate that having a NOTA option can lead to increased voter turnout, as individuals feel their voices are acknowledged, even when they are dissatisfied with available choices. This can create a more dynamic political landscape where parties are incentivized to listen to the electorate and adjust their platforms accordingly.



Proposed Policy Amendment

- To implement the NOTA option in South Africa, we propose an amendment to the Electoral Act to include the following key components:
 - **Incorporation of NOTA on Ballots:** Amend the existing regulations governing ballot design to include a NOTA option alongside the listed candidates. This option would clearly state "None of the Above" and allow voters to express their preference for no candidate.
 - **Definition of NOTA's Impact:** Clearly define the implications of selecting NOTA. If most voters select NOTA in a given election, a re-election process could be triggered, compelling political parties to reconsider their candidates and nominate new options for the electorate.
 - **Public Awareness Campaign:** Launch a national awareness campaign to educate voters about the NOTA option, emphasising its purpose and significance. This campaign should focus on expressing dissatisfaction and **how NOTA can influence political parties to present better candidates.**
 - **Evaluation and Monitoring Framework:** Establish a framework to evaluate the impact of the NOTA option on voter turnout and party responsiveness. This would include analysing voter behaviour, assessing how political parties adjust their strategies in response to NOTA outcomes, and gathering feedback from the electorate on their experiences.
 - **Integration with Voter Education Initiatives:** Incorporate the NOTA option into broader voter education initiatives, particularly targeting young and first-time voters, to ensure they understand their choice and feel empowered to utilise it.

Constitutional Considerations

Introducing a NOTA option aligns with the South African Constitution's commitment to promoting equality (Section 9) and ensuring that every citizen's voice is acknowledged. By providing a legitimate platform for expressing dissatisfaction, we reinforce the democratic principle that all citizens should be able to participate in the electoral process meaningfully.

Moreover, the NOTA option can enhance political accountability. Suppose political parties recognize that a significant portion of the electorate is dissatisfied with their candidates. In that case, they are incentivized to improve their selection processes, leading to a more representative and responsive political environment.



According to the constitutional right to make political choices in s. 19(1), NOTA will allow that choice to be expressed. Not voting and opposing the other options cannot be equated. With this option, eligible voters who are strongly dissatisfied can make that political choice.

Introducing a "None of the Above" option on ballots is a crucial reform that empowers voters and reinforces the principles of fairness and accountability in South Africa's electoral system. Allowing citizens to express dissatisfaction with available candidates can stimulate dialogue around candidate selection and encourage political parties to present more appealing platforms. This reform acknowledges all voters' voices and aligns with constitutional values, fostering a more inclusive and engaged electorate.

3- Establishing Fixed Election Dates

Creating a set election date will promote transparency and allow citizens to plan their engagement in the electoral process. This reform echoes the constitutional value of openness (Section 1) and demystifies the electoral timeline. By providing a predictable electoral calendar, we can increase mobilisation efforts, particularly among youth voters who often face competing demands on their time.

4- Enhanced Absentee and Early Voting Measures

Increasing absentee and early voting measures is essential for accommodating the diverse lifestyles and needs of younger voters and other population segments. By enhancing access to these voting options, we uphold the constitutional guarantee of free and fair elections as enshrined in Section 19 of the South African Constitution. Implementing flexible voting measures is crucial for ensuring that all citizens can participate in the democratic process, regardless of their circumstances on election day. This approach aims to reduce barriers to participation and foster a more engaged and representative electorate. Furthermore, this would increase awareness of the voter registration deadline and thus increase voter registration.



Research has shown that absenteeism and early voting availability can significantly increase voter turnout, particularly among young people who may face barriers such as work, studies, or other commitments on election day. According to a survey by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), countries that offer flexible voting options tend to have higher voter engagement rates. For example, in the United States, states with early voting have reported turnout increases of up to 10% compared to those without such measures.

In South Africa, the Electoral Commission (IEC) has recognized the need for greater access to voting, particularly in light of changing societal dynamics and the need to engage younger voters. The IEC's 2024 Voter Participation Report indicated that many eligible voters cited logistical challenges and time constraints as significant barriers to participation. Enhancing absentee and early voting options can address these challenges and encourage greater electoral engagement.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of flexible voting measures, highlighting the need for adaptable systems that prioritise public health while ensuring democratic participation. This has led to increased global discourse on the necessity of absenteeism and early voting as standard practices in electoral systems.

Proposed Policy Amendment

- To implement enhanced absentee and early voting measures in South Africa, we propose the following amendments to the Electoral Act:
 - **Expansion of Early Voting Locations:** Establish multiple early voting stations across various regions, ensuring all citizens can access early voting opportunities in their communities. This should include additional resources and staffing provisions to handle the increased demand during early voting periods.
 - **Simplified Absentee Voting Process:** Streamline the absentee voting process to make it more accessible. This includes allowing voters to apply for absentee ballots online, providing clear instructions on completing and returning their ballots and extending deadlines for absentee ballot requests and submissions.
 - **Increased Voter Education Initiatives:** Launch comprehensive voter education campaigns focused on absentee and early voting options. This campaign should utilise social media and other popular platforms among younger voters to effectively communicate the benefits and procedures for these voting methods.



- **Real-Time Tracking of Ballots:** Implement a real-time voter tracking system for absentee ballots. This transparency will build trust in the electoral process and ensure that voters can confirm their votes have been received and counted.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Framework:** Create a framework to monitor the effectiveness of absentee and early voting measures. This would include gathering data on voter turnout rates, demographics of absentee and early voters, and feedback from participants to improve the voting experience continuously.

Constitutional Considerations

Enhancing absentee and early voting measures aligns with the constitutional guarantee of free and fair elections (Section 19). By providing flexible voting options, we are upholding the principles of inclusivity and accessibility, ensuring that all citizens, especially younger voters, can participate meaningfully in the electoral process. This reform also addresses the growing need for adaptability in our electoral system, reflecting the changing lifestyles and preferences of the electorate.

Enhancing absentee and early voting measures is critical for promoting voter engagement and participation in South Africa's democratic process. By accommodating the diverse needs of voters and addressing logistical barriers, we can create a more inclusive and representative electoral system. This reform aligns with constitutional values and fosters a culture of civic engagement, encouraging all citizens to exercise their right to vote actively. By implementing these measures, we can work towards a more engaged electorate that is equipped to shape the future of our democracy.



Conclusion

The need for reform in the South African electoral system is urgent and essential for fostering a vibrant democracy that truly reflects the voices of all citizens, particularly the youth. The proposed measures—voting at any station within a region, direct presidential elections, including a "None of the Above" option, fixed election dates, and enhanced absentee and early voting—are practical and resonate with the values embedded in our Constitution. As SoWeVote, we believe these reforms will empower young voters and enhance their participation in the electoral process, ultimately leading to a more representative and responsive democracy. By investing in the engagement of young voters today, we lay the foundation for a politically active citizenry in the future. We urge the Electoral Reform Consultation Panel to consider these recommendations as part of its mandate to promote an electoral system that reflects the people's will and upholds the constitutional principles of inclusivity, accountability, and transparency.

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