

# Do you want my vote?

Understanding the factors that influence voting  
among young South Africans

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# Executive summary

Identifying what drives young people to vote, or abstain from doing so, is critical to strengthening democracy. The objective of this study was thus to understand the factors that influenced the voting behaviour of young South Africans between the ages of 18 and 24 years, so as to inform efforts aimed at increasing democratic participation amongst this demographic group.

This monograph presents a clearer understanding of young people's attitudes towards politics and voting. It does this by relating the narratives of young students in high schools, Further Education and Training (FET) colleges and universities in urban and rural areas, across all nine provinces in South Africa.

The evidence presented in this report indicates a major difference in voter registration levels among South Africans between the ages of 18 to 19 (33%); and 20 to 29 (64%). This difference is also notable in the respondents' narratives – that is, the way high-school students responded to the questions as compared to older cohorts in FET colleges and universities.

This report illustrates that although young people acknowledge the importance of voting, they do not often identify it as the best way to bring about change. Through the narratives of the participants, this monograph paints a picture of a demographic group that is growing increasingly frustrated by the challenges they continue to face. These include high levels of unemployment, corruption, poor infrastructure (i.e. housing) and poor education.

The responses narrated here show that while the participants are interested in what is good for the country, they will only support leaders who are not corrupt; with whom they can identify; and whom they admire. A combination of low levels of trust in government, which the respondents often describe as non-responsive to their demands, and the limitations of current South African politics (despite all the problems with the current ruling party, participants also find alternative political parties and leaders unsatisfactory in one way or another), are factors that often deter these young people from engaging in politics and voting.

Young people are not as apathetic as conventional wisdom would lead us to believe

The narratives presented here inform the conclusion that young people are, in fact, not as apathetic as conventional wisdom would lead us to believe. Their participation in politics and voting depends on how satisfied they are with democracy; and the performance of the ruling party and alternative political parties in addressing the socio-economic challenges they continue to face.

This is a demographic group that wants to see action and change in their communities. They are not enticed by words and promises. The participants in this study still feel alienated and excluded from

politics, and often mention that politics are too complicated and something they don't know enough about to effectively engage in.

The study identifies four important areas and opportunities that may help increase young people's participation in democratic processes, such as the elections and voting. The first is through a review of existing civic and voter education programmes in schools. A need for such a review was evident across all the narratives, but particularly among high-school students. Curricular strategies should not only focus on young peoples' knowledge and understanding of politics, but also on their trust and confidence in government.

The second is meaningful engagement with the youth. Platforms such as seminars, workshops and inter-party dialogues by government, political parties, civil society, the Independent Electoral Commission, among others, may encourage political awareness and improve voter turnout and participation.

This corresponds to the third opportunity of ensuring that the information disseminated by stakeholders is made accessible, particularly to youth in rural areas, who often mentioned that they were not aware of various voter education programmes.

The fourth and final opportunity for improving young people's participation in democratic processes is the need for government, political parties and other stakeholders to find innovative ways of accessing and engaging with the youth.

The participants in this study often referred to social media as a platform where such engagement might happen. The effectiveness of social media in targeting this demographic group cannot be understated. This was clearly illustrated in the social media page that the Institute For Security Studies (ISS) launched as part of the research study titled Youth Vote South Africa (YVSA). This page allowed the ISS to expand its research to young people with Internet access, and further explore their views and attitudes on the elections and voting in 2014. The following of the YVSA Facebook page is currently at 6 534 followers, and continues to grow.

# Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>ANC</b>	African National Congress
<b>FET</b>	Further Education and Training
<b>IEC</b>	Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa
<b>ISS</b>	Institute for Security Studies
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>SAPS</b>	South African Police Service
<b>StatsSA</b>	Statistics South Africa
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>YVSA</b>	Youth Vote South Africa

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# Section 1

## Introduction

The 2014 South African national elections were the first in South Africa in which the ‘Mandela generation’<sup>1</sup> – those young South Africans born after 1994 in a democratic country, under the leadership of former president Nelson Mandela – was set to play an integral part. During the country’s 2014 national and provincial elections, a total of 25 million people registered to vote, out of some 31.4 million eligible voters.<sup>2</sup> Young people between the ages of 18 and 29 constituted about 10.9 million, or 34% of the eligible voting-age population.<sup>3</sup> Of these, almost 1.9 million were 18- and 19-year-olds.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, it was branded a ‘youth’ election and it was an important barometer of the issues of concern for those unburdened with the baggage of the apartheid past in the same way as previous generations had been.

The high proportion of young people in South Africa means that their votes could have a greater influence on the country’s political landscape, than their older cohorts. Media speculation and academic debates, however, increasingly point to apathy as an obstacle to achieving this.<sup>5</sup> The 2014 national elections revealed that only 33% (646 313) of South Africans aged 18 to 19 had registered to vote, based on Statistics South Africa’s (StatsSA) 2013 population estimates.<sup>6</sup> Among the 20 to 29 and 30 to 39 age group, 64% (5 759 236) and 79.8% (6 180 534) respectively of those eligible to vote were registered.<sup>7</sup> This indicates that there is a major shift from the 18- to 19-year-old age group to the 20- to 29-year-old constituency.

This report confirms a picture of political withdrawal. Drawing on 49 one-on-one interviews and 277 focus-group discussions with young South Africans, the report reveals that the apparent disengagement from electoral participation among this key demographic group can be attributed to a range of factors other than mere voter apathy.

## Key findings

- Young people are growing increasingly frustrated by the continued socio-economic challenges, such as unemployment, poor infrastructure (e.g. housing) and poor education, they face.
- Corruption is having a detrimental impact on this demographic and affects whether they participate in democratic processes, such as the elections, or not.
- There are low levels of trust among young people in government and alienation over its lack of responsiveness to their demands.
- Young people do not feel competent enough to engage in politics because it is often too complicated.

- Young people are showing signs of declining partisan attachment to the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), but are also illustrating signs of dissatisfaction with the current available choices in terms of other political parties.

## Recommendations

- A review of existing civic and voter education programmes in schools should be conducted to evaluate their effectiveness in generating democratically active young people who are aware of their rights and responsibilities. Curricular strategies should not focus only on young people's knowledge and understanding of politics, but also on their confidence and trust in government and its ability to respond to their demands.
- Platforms need to be created that encourage political awareness and knowledge of democratic processes among this demographic. Meaningful engagement with the youth through seminars, workshops and inter-party dialogues by government, political parties, civil-society organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the IEC and other stakeholders could improve voter turnout and participation.
- Government and other stakeholders need to find innovative ways of accessing and engaging with the youth. Social media provide an important platform to better engage with these young people, and foster a sense of acknowledgement and understanding of the challenges they face as well as their thinking on the political system and the rule of law in the country. The effectiveness of social media in targeting this demographic was clearly illustrated in the Institute for Security Studies' (ISS) Youth Vote South Africa (YVSA) social-media page, whose following continues to grow.
- Civil society, NGOs, the IEC and other stakeholders play a significant role in contributing to young people's knowledge and understanding of democracy. These stakeholders need to ensure that they disseminate information that is accessible, particularly among rural youth. This could be done through workshops, seminars and social-media platforms.

## Literature review

Fluctuating levels of youth participation are a concern in many countries. A review of the literature on youth voting behaviour and democratic participation illustrates similar patterns in countries such as Britain, Canada and the US, among others. In Britain, electoral participation among young people between the ages of 18 and 24 has seen a steady decline since the 1997 British general elections, when at least 43% of those aged 18 to 24 did not vote.<sup>8</sup> In 2001 this figure increased to 61%, and in 2005 a concerning 63% of those aged 18 to 24 did not vote.<sup>9</sup> In Canada fluctuating levels of youth voter turnout has been recorded as far back as 1965 among those aged 18 to 24.<sup>10</sup> In the most recent Canadian federal general elections, the trend in voter turnout has been moving downwards without much respite.<sup>11</sup> In 2004 voter turnout among those aged 18 to 24 fell as low as 37% and in 2006 rose slightly to 44%, and then dropped again to 37% in 2008.<sup>12</sup> In 2011 the figure increased slightly from the 2008 election to 39%.<sup>13</sup> In the US voting rates among young people dropped from 51% in 1964 to 38% in 2012.<sup>14</sup> However, there have been periods where voting participation by young people has increased; particularly in 2004 and 2008, when voter registration among those aged 18 to 24 increased to 42% and 44%, respectively.<sup>15</sup> Decreases in voter registration were quite evident in 1996 (32%) and again in 2012, when the number of registered voters dropped to 38%, following the increase in 2008.<sup>16</sup>

Political apathy is often cited as a key explanation for low voter turnout among young voters.<sup>17</sup> Young people are often identified as having low levels of political interest, with many opting not to participate in elections.<sup>18</sup> In South Africa a survey conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council in 2008 illustrated that at least 53% of those aged 18 to 29 said that they would not vote in the 2009 elections, citing a 'lack of interest in voting' as their main reason.<sup>19</sup>

According to other scholars, however, young people are not politically apathetic but are affected by wider societal factors, which then influence whether they engage in politics or not.<sup>20</sup> In South Africa, for example, young people are often confronted with a host of challenges, such as youth unemployment, a dysfunctional public education system, and crime and corruption. According to the 2015 national and provincial labour market report on youth, compiled by StatsSA, an estimated 45.4% of males and 53.2% of females between the ages of 20 and 24 are unemployed.<sup>21</sup> Many of these young people have given up seeking employment.<sup>22</sup> Some researchers therefore argue that it is not so much that young people are apathetic, but that democratic institutions have failed to engage young people.<sup>23</sup> The youth increasingly feel alienated and sidelined from political life; some young people do not feel as though they can engage in formal politics; while others feel that issues that are most important to them are not included on government's agenda.<sup>24</sup> As a result, young people begin to pull away from participating in traditional forms of political activity, believing that the current political system does not solve pertinent issues, such as youth unemployment and joblessness.<sup>25</sup>

Other research points to the idea that young people are becoming increasingly cynical towards political parties.<sup>26</sup> According to Dermody, Hanmer-Lloyd and Scullion, 'Young people perceive politicians and governments as dishonest and ineffectual – contributing to their belief that voting is a "worthless" act or creating frustration, resulting in the withholding of their vote.'<sup>27</sup>

Lack of political accountability by political leaders and the fact that they often only engage youth at election time are issues that appear to affect whether young people participate in elections or not.<sup>28</sup> In a survey conducted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in 2012, 49.8% of the youth surveyed agreed with the following statement: 'Leaders are not concerned with people like me.'<sup>29</sup> In addition, 49.3% agreed that there was no way for them to get public officials to listen to them.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that a high proportion of young people lack confidence in political leaders. It is, however, unclear whether this influences their participation or not in the elections at national and local level. Although various scholars have identified certain factors that could account for the lack of voter participation in the country, these explanations have not been fully tested with rigorous methodologies, and as such require further investigation.

'Young people perceive politicians as dishonest – contributing to their belief that voting is a "worthless" act'

A number of scholars have recognised the emergence of a new political generation. Young people are seen to be moving away from the conventional way of engaging in politics, opting instead for new forms of political participation, such as community work, signing petitions and taking part in various forms of protest action.<sup>31</sup> In South Africa low voter turnout may not be indicative of the fact that young people do not participate in democratic processes or activities. For some young people, participating in democratic processes, such as elections, is not seen as an effective way to bring about positive economic change.<sup>32</sup> For them, taking an active part in religious or environmental groups that allow them to express themselves and contribute to a functioning civil society is seen

as far more effective.<sup>33</sup> They are also often 'involved in, if not instigators of, protest activity'<sup>34</sup> – seen recently in the 'Rhodes must fall' and 'Fees must fall' movements. Such activity tends to be concerned with issues of service delivery and economic freedom.

The Internet and social media are increasingly playing a significant role in identifying new forms of democratic participation among citizens, and more particularly the youth.<sup>35</sup> In the past few years, social networking sites have become platforms for young people to express their views and interest in politics.<sup>36</sup> For some writers, technology has been identified as having the ability to link decision makers and political elites with citizens and 'hard-to-reach' groups, such as young people.<sup>37</sup>

The use of social media to mobilise citizens and persuade them to vote for a given party or candidate was effectively illustrated in the 2008 US presidential election. Barack Obama's campaign made use of sites such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube, along with other social media, such as podcasting and mobile messaging.<sup>38</sup> The election, dubbed by some the 'Facebook election', saw nearly 70% of the vote among Americans aged 25 years and younger going to Obama.<sup>39</sup> The number of his Facebook and Twitter followers increased on a daily basis, and the sites allowed users to publish activities and send postings to one another.<sup>40</sup> By 2011 Obama's Twitter account, @BarackObama – which he used to promote legislation and support for his policies – was the third Twitter account in the world to have more than 10 million followers.<sup>41</sup> This illustrates how new public channels are now available for young people to engage in debates about politics and how they regard their future.<sup>42</sup> Such media also allow for 'greater understanding of what has largely been hidden from view, given the lack of access to formal power that most young people have'.<sup>43</sup>

A review of the literature on the subject illustrates that there is still a lack of understanding about the factors that encourage young people to engage, or not, in democratic processes, such as elections. In South Africa it is far from clear whether issues of political alienation, declining confidence in political leadership, social media and the socio-economic challenges faced by young people are factors that influence their voting behaviour, and their likelihood of participating in elections. Given the concerns over declining voter turnout and low levels of political interest among young South Africans, the need to understand what drives those who do engage, and what discourages those who do not, is critical if we are to strengthen participatory democracy.<sup>44</sup>

# Section 2

## **Aims and objectives of the research**

Because young people between the ages of 18 and 29 account for about 34% of the eligible voting-age population<sup>45</sup> in South Africa, understanding how they feel about voting and the extent to which they believe they have power to influence the direction of the country is important if we wish to increase democratic participation and so strengthen democracy.<sup>46</sup> The aim of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influenced the participation of young South Africans (i.e. 18- to 24-year-olds) in the 2014 elections by speaking directly to young people.

The main objective of the research was to understand the factors that influence young people's participation in elections through qualitative data collection and analysis, so as to inform efforts to increase democratic participation.

In this research paper, the terms 'youth' and 'young people' are used interchangeably. The focus of this study and paper is those between the ages of 18 and 24.

## **Research design and methods**

This qualitative research project encompassed two components:

- Face-to-face interviews and focus-group discussions with young South African citizens aged between 18 and 24 at 34 educational institutions countrywide. These were conducted to identify the factors that influence voter turnout among young people.
- An in-depth analysis of news and social media. The rationale behind this was to provide an overview of the opinions and attitudes of young people regarding democracy and governance in South Africa.

## **Data gathering through face-to-face interviews and focus groups**

The research study made use of a combination of one-on-one interviews and focus-group discussions with young people at schools, universities and Further Education and Training (FET) colleges in each of the country's nine provinces.<sup>47</sup> According to a 2012 StatsSA report on the social profile of vulnerable groups in South Africa, 72.9% of males and females between the ages of 18 and 24 attend an educational institution.<sup>48</sup> A wide cross section of youth in this age bracket can therefore be reached through educational institutions. Although the present research acknowledges that attendance levels at an educational institution after secondary school does start to drop and that this study is limited to those individuals who are enrolled in educational institutions, bias of some sort is impossible to avoid in a study of this nature. It should be noted that, as a qualitative research

project, the findings are not generalisable but seek rather to contribute context and depth to the understanding of the attitudes of young voters, as revealed through surveys and polls.

To test the methodology and questions, a pilot study was conducted in Gauteng in December 2013. This allowed for the in-depth interview and focus-group tools to be refined before the research took place in the various educational institutions.

The research data was collected over a six-month period from 1 February 2014 to 31 July 2014, and included a total of 18 public/rural and independent/urban high schools,<sup>49</sup> seven universities<sup>50</sup> and nine FET colleges.<sup>51</sup> A total of 49 one-on-one interviews and 277 focus-group discussions were completed (see Table 1), with an average of seven participants per focus group. Participants were made up of 49.5% males and 50.5% females between the ages of 18 and 24.

**Table 1: Number of in-depth, one-on-one interviews and focus-group discussions per province**

Province	Focus groups	One-on-one interviews
Eastern Cape	31	13
Free State	30	10
Gauteng	41	8
KwaZulu-Natal	23	4
Limpopo	36	2
Mpumalanga	19	0
North West	48	4
Northern Cape	3	0
Western Cape	46	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>49</b>

The use of focus groups and individual interviews to collect qualitative information during the data-collection phase has been identified in a number of similar international studies<sup>52</sup> conducted on youth participation in the electoral process and youth voting behaviour. Using these methods in our research therefore enabled us to compare the views of young South Africans with those of young people in other countries.

The focus-group discussions and interviews were conducted at randomly selected educational institutions in each of the nine provinces. The sampling methods are discussed in the following section.

## Sampling

The secondary schools at which the focus-group discussions and interviews were conducted were randomly selected from the list of educational institutions provided by the Department of Basic Education and the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa's websites. The study sought a mix of public and private schools, fee-paying and non-fee-paying schools, urban and rural schools, as well as single-gender and mix-gender schools (see Table 2). Permission to conduct the research in the selected schools was obtained from the Department of Basic Education, the Provincial Education Department and education district offices.

**Table 2: List of educational institutions that took part in the research, by province**

Province	University	FET college	Independent high school	Public high school
<b>Eastern Cape</b>	Rhodes University	Port Elizabeth FET College	Get Ahead College	Hoërskool Andrew Rabie
<b>Free State</b>	University of the Free State	Motheo FET College	Academy of Excellence	Diamant Hoogte
<b>Gauteng</b>	University of the Witwatersrand	Sedibeng FET College	Blue Hills College	Etwatwa Secondary School
<b>KwaZulu-Natal</b>	University of Zululand	KZN Coastal FET College	Roseway Waldorf School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rydal Park Secondary School</li> <li>• Umlazi Comtech</li> </ul>
<b>Limpopo</b>	University of Limpopo	Waterberg FET College	Mitchell House School	Kgakoa (Mogakoa) Secondary School
<b>Mpumalanga</b>	No university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nkangala FET College</li> <li>• Gert Sibande FET College</li> </ul>	No independent school responded	Leonard Ntshuntshe Secondary School
<b>North West</b>	North-West University	Taletso FET College	Lebone II – College of the Royal Bafokeng	Sejankabo High School
<b>Northern Cape</b>	No university	Declined	St Patrick's CBC Kimberley	Rietvale High School
<b>Western Cape</b>	University of Cape Town	West Coast College	Somerset College	Woodlands Secondary School

A systematic random sampling method was used to select FET colleges and universities in each of the nine provinces from lists available from the Department of Higher Education and Training website<sup>53</sup> (in the case of the FET colleges), and from a list of South African universities provided on the southafrica.info website (see Table 2).<sup>54</sup> For the FET colleges and universities, the relevant research heads were approached for permission to conduct the research. An information sheet outlining the nature of the research study, along with the questions to be asked during the focus groups and one-on-one interviews, was sent to the institutions that were contacted.

## Research process

At the secondary schools, potential participants in grades 11 and 12 were approached during life-orientation classes and lunch breaks. Potential participants from the FET colleges and universities were approached randomly during lunch hours and between classes. At some campuses students were addressed during assembly. Focus-group discussions were conducted over two classes/lessons in some secondary schools, taking into account the number of interested potential participants.

At each focus-group session and one-on-one interview, the background and purpose of the research was explained to the potential participants, and the facilitator and note taker/observer were introduced. The facilitator also informed the potential participants about how the information would be used. A letter of informed consent (see Appendix C) and an information sheet (see Appendix A) outlining the nature of the study were given to each participant. The letter of informed consent and the information sheet were explained clearly to the participants in their own languages before they were asked to sign.

The focus-group discussions and one-on-one interviews took place on the premises of the educational institutions in a classroom, lecture room or sports field, for a maximum of 45 minutes' duration. Each focus group included one facilitator and one note taker/observer. Participants also received lunch as a thank-you gesture for their time.

In each focus group the facilitator and the note taker/observer were knowledgeable about the project and its aims and objectives, understood the questions to be asked (see Appendix B) and were tactful in how they managed the young participants. The focus-group discussions and interviews were mainly conducted in English; some, however, were conducted in Afrikaans, isiXhosa and isiZulu. Each focus-group session was digitally recorded.

## Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to opt out of the study before, during and after the study had begun. This was explained clearly to the participants during the informed-consent process in their own languages before each focus group and one-on-one interview. Where it was evident that the participants were not speaking freely in front of one another and/or to the focus-group facilitator, they were approached and offered an opportunity to engage in a one-on-one interview. Participants were free to decline this offer, or end the discussion at any stage if they chose to do so.

The ages of participants were verified with them as well as with the school (where possible), to ensure that people younger than 18 were not accidentally included. Student cards, identity documents and class registers were used to ensure the students were South African citizens and therefore eligible to take part in the research study, as well as eligible to register and vote. The ISS researchers involved in the study orally explained to the participants that they would not reveal the participants' identity, and that only their age, sex and the location of the interview would be identified. It was also orally explained to the participants, in their own language/s, before each focus group and interview that under no circumstances would their right to a secret ballot be infringed, nor would they be asked to reveal whom they would vote for in the elections or their personal political-party affiliations.



Although this paper draws primarily on the data collected from the one-on-one and focus-group interviews, to complement this data and ensure diverse coverage of the issues discussed by young people in relation to the 2014 election, other data sources, such as news and social media, were also monitored for the duration of the study.

## News and social-media analysis

In the past few years, social media, mobile technology and online news sites have become platforms for young people to express their views on the state of the country.<sup>55</sup> New public avenues are now available for young people to engage in debates about politics and how they see their future.<sup>56</sup> Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are just some of the media that allow for a better understanding of the youth's perceptions of voting and politics in the country; views which are often hidden given the limited formal power that most youth have.

South Africa is a technologically developed country, with an estimated 88% of young people (i.e. 15- to 34-year-olds) living in a dwelling that has access to a landline, cellphone or the Internet.<sup>57</sup> In 2012 the results of a research study commissioned by infoDev, a global partnership programme within the World Bank Group, about the use of mobile phones in South Africa found that more than 75% of South Africans aged 15 and older own a cellphone.<sup>58</sup>

The 2012 United Nations Children's (Emergency) Fund South African Mobile Generation study, identified South African residents as 'one of the highest users of mobile technology and mobile social networking on

Social media allow for a better understanding of the youth's perceptions of voting and politics

the continent'.<sup>59</sup> According to the 2015 *World Wide Worx South African Social Media Landscape* report, 11.8 million South Africans, or about 22% of the population, are now using Facebook, a significant increase from the 9.4 million users in 2014.<sup>60</sup> In addition, 6.6 million South Africans access Twitter.<sup>61</sup> The number of South Africans accessing social media on their mobile phones has also seen a marked increase, with as many as 8.8 million accessing Facebook via their mobile devices.<sup>62</sup> Young South Africans are increasingly making use of social media to bring their views across and engage in democratic processes.<sup>63</sup> This phenomenon is no better captured than in the following comment made by a young student at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, in Port Elizabeth, during a presentation on the 2011 Reconciliation Barometer survey results:

Most of us never really grew up in the deep 70s where there was wide struggle and everything else – we grew up in a digital age. Our socialisation and media, especially media, is the part that actually informs us mostly, rather than telling stories in the fireplace, because there's no more fireplaces anymore, there's TV ... Now, as it relates to political affiliations and everything else, you watch a nice advert on TV about another organisation, which I won't mention, you say, no man – what's this trend about voting and regurgitating my vote with the same vote for the same party, whereas there's a new trend now. Is it organic that I have to vote for this organisation or should I vote for this one, because it's the 'cool' thing to do? ... As young people, we are not fully informed, we don't read a lot, we Google and we Facebook a lot and watch TV ...<sup>64</sup>

## Youth Vote South Africa

For the part of the research study that monitored social media, a Facebook page titled Youth Vote South Africa (YVSA) was set up. This page targeted first-time voters between the ages of 18 and 24. The page was promoted using Facebook advertising, ISS Today articles and social-media endorsement through other ISS social-media platforms to attract as many of the target audience as possible. The YVSA page was launched on 1 December 2013 and continued to be actively managed until 8 May 2014. The page gave the ISS an opportunity to further explore the views and attitudes of young people with Internet access on democratic participation and voting in the 2014 election. As a result of the viral nature of social networking sites such as Facebook, the YVSA page grew exponentially in the lead-up to the election, and by May 2014 the page had generated 6 912 'likes'.<sup>65</sup> Although the YVSA Facebook page attracted the attention of people outside the targeted age group, young people aged between 18 and 24 made up the vast majority (85%) of people who posted a 'like' for the page.

The primary purpose of the Facebook page was to initiate discussions and encourage debate about directed topics regarding voting behaviour, and how the target market perceives democratic participation in South Africa. The content used on the page focused on driving debate and informing the target market of the importance of democratic participation. The Facebook page offered insight into how young people who have Internet access perceive democratic participation and how they viewed the 2014 elections. The method used enabled the researcher to identify user demographics, including age, sex and location. This data was taken from the information supplied by the users on their profiles and was not separately verified. This data was used to complement the data collected from the other sources used in the research study, namely the one-on-one interviews and focus-group discussions, and news media.

Blogs and other online forums were also followed, including the *Mail & Guardian's* Thought Leader, which hosts blogs, opinion and analysis contributed by various young bloggers; *The Star's* opinion and analysis forums; Business Day Live's Opinion Forum; Sowetan Live; and Sowetan Live Youth Tube, a forum dedicated to the youth.

Traditional news media, such as the *Mail & Guardian*, *The Star*, the *Sowetan* and the *Pretoria News* were also used as sources of information to identify how young people feel about participating in the elections and why they hold particular views.

## Structure of the report

The main focus of this research report is to document the research findings collected from the focus groups and interviews. The comments and statements made by the participants in the research study provide insight into the issues that influence young South Africans' voting decisions and, in some cases, deter them from participating in elections altogether.

Section 3 begins by highlighting the issues that most concern young people in South Africa. Section 4 deals specifically with young people's attitudes towards and perceptions of politics and voting in South Africa. Section 5 concludes by providing an analysis of the research findings and highlights significant commonalities and differences found in similar research studies.

# Section 3

## Young South Africans' most pressing concerns

To create an environment where the respondents felt comfortable and stimulated to talk about their views on elections and voting and, more importantly, the factors that influence them in their voting or deter them from participating in elections, the interviews and focus-group discussions began by asking young people what they thought were the most significant problems in South Africa today. Although some of the concerns raised by them are particular to their age group, such as youth unemployment and poor-quality education, for the most part the concerns listed by these young people are generally highlighted by many South Africans. These concerns did, however, provide context to the discussion and the responses that followed, and the wide range of issues raised at the start of each discussion became matters of concern throughout.

### The burden of unemployment

Young people continue to be disproportionately burdened by the high rate of unemployment in South Africa. In 2015 young people between the ages of 15 and 34 accounted for approximately 19.7 million (55%) of South Africa's working-age population.<sup>66</sup> The absorption of these young people into the labour market is substantially lower than that of their older counterparts.<sup>67</sup> In 2011 youth unemployment increased to 36%, up from 33% in 2008.<sup>68</sup> In subsequent years the youth unemployment rate has remained between 35% and 37%.<sup>69</sup> It is therefore not surprising that unemployment was mentioned as the most pressing issue by respondents from the different provinces and in the various categories of educational institutions. Unemployment was of particular concern, however, among participants from the FET colleges.

Young people link the high level of youth unemployment to the poor quality of education that they receive, as well as to the high rate of illiteracy experienced across the country. They are concerned about the lack of progress they

Young people identify the ruling party as 'not doing enough' to reduce unemployment

see in the country, and identify the ruling party as 'not doing enough' to reduce the high level of unemployment in South Africa. They point to government as the body that is responsible for the high unemployment rate. For the youth, government needs to create more jobs.

Participants speak with helplessness and hopelessness around the issue of employment, highlighting that whether they have an educational qualification or not, they will struggle to find a job. They believe that this joblessness is what pushes them into doing 'bad things'. Unemployment was also highlighted as the reason why people – and, more particularly, young people – get involved in crime:

I think the most important problem facing South Africa is the unemployment rate, which results in crime – people just find stealing as a mode of survival. People do not work; people do not have anything for their families to put on the table to eat. In order for them to survive, they need to steal, which is a wake-up call to government. But they are doing nothing.  
(Female university student, 18 years old, Limpopo)

Although young people are very vocal about the challenges they face in finding work, they also acknowledge the ‘laziness’ of the youth, who ‘don’t want to study’ because they are ‘not interested’ and ‘want an easy life’:

I think the youth in South Africa should study in order for them to get jobs. You can’t find a job if you’re not qualified. ... If they can rise up and study, everything can work in South Africa.  
(Male university student, 20 years old, KwaZulu-Natal)

The frustration experienced by students in universities and FET colleges countrywide is evident when they speak about how difficult it is for young graduates to find work once they have completed their studies. They are often told they need experience but are never given the opportunity to gain the necessary experience:

People go to study but when we look for a job, people want experience. How do we get experience if we do not get a chance to train to get the job we want? (Female FET college student, 21 years old, Mpumalanga)

Graduates [...] are unemployed due to [...] lack of experience. Ask yourselves this question, where will the experience come from if nobody gives you a chance ... !!! Messed up system.  
(Male, YVSA Facebook page)

## The scourge of crime and corruption

In South Africa the issue of crime and corruption continues to undermine the national integrity of the country, and to generate public anger and outrage. Each year commercial crimes, such as fraud and corruption, continue to cost the South African economy billions of Rands.<sup>70</sup> During our discussions with participants, corrupt officials and criminals were often seen as ‘getting away with it’ and the South African Police Service (SAPS) was perceived as doing little to fight crime.

Crime and corruption were issues of concern mentioned by participants in the different categories of educational institutions and in all the provinces. Crime was a key concern among the participants from FET colleges, whereas university students were more inclined to mention corruption as a concern. The issue of corruption was also mentioned more frequently among participants in KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape.

Respondents use terms such as ‘not taking action’ and ‘doing nothing about’ fighting crime to describe the SAPS. They mentioned crimes such as rape, abuse of women and children, violence and prostitution in their discussions. Rape was an issue mentioned frequently by participants in the Western Cape, and particularly so by public high-school and FET college students. These young people highlight the ineffectiveness of the law when it comes to protecting rape victims and holding perpetrators to account. They explain how perpetrators of rape and abuse are often not caught in their communities. They also argue that, when arrested, perpetrators are often found not guilty and set free:

Most of the women in my environment are scared to walk around at 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. in the night. This is because the police are doing nothing about it. It is a problem. To be a part of the police, your job is very important. It is no joke; it is a job that you must do 24/7. That is your job for the rest of your life if you want to be part of the police ... the police are scared of the gangsters ... they must do something about it because if they do not do anything about it, who will? (Male FET college student, 19 years old, Western Cape)

My biggest problem is rape in our community ... many people are raping children – even [those that are] underage, something has to be done. (Female high-school student, 19 years old, Northern Cape)

The participants acknowledge the socio-economic challenges many South Africans face and that the environments they grow up in are hotbeds for such crimes:

I think the most pertinent challenge we face in South Africa is crime, but if we go a bit deeper into the issues of crime, we look at the idea of socio-economic backgrounds, specifically in terms of how South Africa functions, the social make-up and the interaction. Many of these crimes are usually targeted at women and children – issues of rape specifically, and that is one that I am quite passionate about ... and the root causes of it would be socio-economic. (Male university student, 19 years old, Eastern Cape)

They agree that crime is something that needs to be fought by everyone yet often point to the SAPS and political leaders as those responsible for putting an end to crime in the country. During their discussions, participants illustrated how crime has become ‘normalised’ in society:

I think the most important problem in South Africa is crime because it is everywhere and it is happening on a daily basis. We here in South Africa become numb towards crime. It happens every day, so we don’t take note of it any more. More should be done by government (but also) by citizens. (Female FET college student, 20 years old, Western Cape)

They speak with disillusionment and anger as they refer to the SAPS and their failure to address crime. The high crime rate in South Africa has made them lose trust in the policing system. They identify the police and ‘people in power’ as those often responsible for conducting crime, ‘so how can they tell us to stop doing crime?’:

The high crime rate in South Africa has made the youth lose trust in the policing system

The problem that we have in South Africa is crime and it does not get solved because the people whom we trust, like the police, get involved in crime and become part of the problem ... (Female FET college student, 23 years old, Limpopo)

Another problem is crime. [The] crime rate is going up and police officers are getting corrupt every day, maybe it is because their salaries cannot satisfy them. (Male high-school student, 18 years old, Mpumalanga)

Although the issue of corruption was spoken about broadly, of key concern was the corruption that takes place within government. Participants across educational institutions and provinces speak with bitterness when they talk about corruption: ‘we are a country stricken by corruption,’ responded one female. They highlight how they have lost trust in the country’s leaders as a result of corruption.

They mention that they feel ‘betrayed’ by political leaders, whom they see as often being involved in corruption, and agree that the country will not improve as long as the leaders are part of the problem. They mention Nkandla as they speak of corruption among the political elite, and highlight how the people who are elected to power want ‘to get rich while the poor remain poor’:

Corruption is our biggest problem. As we’ve seen on the news, there’s been Nkandla and all that, we don’t know what’s going on, and we are here trying to get funding for our studies and they say there is no money, then you turn on the TV – [the] president’s got a big house, upgrading it with what money? What’s going on ... ? (Male university student, 22 years old, KwaZulu-Natal)

I think the most important problem that we have in South Africa is corruption. Most of our officials are corrupt. They are supposed to be our role models. ... They are the same ones who are saying that crime should not be supported and that crime should be fought against. They are doing the same crime that they claim to be fighting against – which is corruption. They are not even scared to go out to the crowd to tell them to vote, while it is obvious that they are eating the taxpayers’ money. They stay in fancy hotels and drive fancy cars. (Male high-school student, 19 years old, Western Cape)

Young people’s frustration is evident when they speak about lack of accountability among political leaders. They argue that these ‘powerful people’ are often involved in corruption, but with ‘no consequences’. They speak with conviction when they highlight how communities are suffering as a result of the state’s corruption, and the fact that leaders are not being held accountable for misusing state funds:

The most important problem [is] that we are being governed by a corrupt leadership, justice is not being done, they go around doing whatever they want to do, they know that they will keep getting paid and life moves on, and no one does anything about it. (Female university student, 23 years old, Limpopo)

Public high-school and FET college students frequently referred to corruption within their local municipalities. For these young people, the impact of corruption at the local level has meant that many community members no longer take part in community meetings, as

they have ‘given up’. FET college students commonly highlighted their experiences of corruption in many day-to-day situations, such as at clinics, hospitals, police stations and even when applying for financial aid through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme.

Communities are suffering as a result of the state’s corruption, and leaders are not being held accountable

Some participants emphasised that they choose not to vote as a consequence of corruption and because they perceive that political leaders use state money for their personal economic gain:

I think the most important problem in South Africa is corruption. The government is too corrupt – no wonder people who are 18 and above don’t want to vote ... they see it as ... useless because the government is corrupt. (Male high-school student, 18 years old, North West)

Nepotism was also commonly mentioned during the discussions on corruption – an issue that was often identified as an obstacle to youth employment. FET college students frequently identified government officials as perpetrators of nepotism and bribery. These students were particularly pessimistic about their future, and spoke with hopelessness as they questioned whether they would ‘ever make it’ in a country where ‘most people who make it have connections’ or ‘pay their way’ and ‘do favours’ to get a job. As one female responded, ‘most of the people don’t get work because in today’s government it’s all about family in the workplace’. A recurrent concern among both university and FET college students across all provinces is that qualified people are often overlooked, and instead friends and family members, whom they see as ‘not qualified’, are employed. They also highlighted their frustrations at the fact that they are ‘always expected to pay a bribe’ for services that should be provided.

## Poor infrastructure and service delivery

Poor or inadequate infrastructure – including water and electricity, public schools, roads and other transport systems, and sanitation/sewerage – is an issue that continues to have a negative impact on many South Africans. Over the years, poor service delivery at municipal-government level, often in the form of inadequate provision and maintenance of basic resources, such as water, electricity, sanitation and housing, has resulted in various communities taking to the streets in what has become termed ‘service-delivery protests’.<sup>71</sup>

Poor infrastructure and service delivery were commonly mentioned by participants across all educational institutions and all provinces. They frequently mentioned the need for authorities to provide better infrastructure and to improve existing infrastructure. Poor infrastructure and service delivery were, however, of particular concern among young FET college and public high-school students in all provinces.

For these young people, infrastructural development and improvements were often seen as things that happen only in the urban areas. FET college students frequently referred to this urban–rural divide. For them, government is focused on improving and ‘investing’ only in ‘urban areas’, and not in rural communities or townships:

I think our biggest problem is the underdevelopment of our rural areas. The rural areas have a lot of shortages – from schools to proper sanitation and hospitals. A lot of people are struggling; our government puts more focus on urban areas and shows complete disregard to the rural areas. (Male FET college student, 24 years old, North West)

Respondents, particularly those in FET colleges and public high schools, were disparaging about the quality of infrastructure and services in poorer communities. They often referred to the standard of social housing provided by government as structurally unsound and would mention that the buildings have ‘cracks’ and that water gets into them when it rains. Roads, they said, often have potholes and the drinking water that is supplied is ‘dirty and contaminated’:

The most important problem I think we have in the country right now is service delivery. There are many communities [...] which still don’t have basic needs. People have to walk long distances to get water and certain things. (Male high-school student, 18 years old, North West)

Service delivery is a big concern. The houses that are being built are not of a good standard.  
(Male FET college student, 21 years old, Eastern Cape)

A common concern among young people is the need for more public schools and universities, particularly in townships and rural areas. They mention how young people often have to travel long distances to school, or have to move to attend a university. In the study, students attending public high schools often mentioned the need for more sports and recreational facilities to be built in rural communities. These students argue that the lack of extramural activities at schools or lack of recreational facilities outside of school is why some young people turn to 'bad things', such as drugs and alcohol – because there is nothing else for them to do.

Participants studying at FET colleges and public high schools regularly highlighted how their parents have been 'promised' various services in return for their votes, such as housing and water. However, after the elections they said that 'nothing changes' and that they still live in 'shacks' with no water. For these participants, there is no reason to vote and take part in the elections when voting brings with it little or no change in their communities:

People 18 and above see voting as useless, as service delivery will not happen. (Male high-school student, 18 years old, Mpumalanga)

The most important problem in South Africa is poor service delivery in the rural areas. Many areas don't have access to water, whereas our parents and us vote for them [political leaders] but they don't keep their promises. (Male university student, 19 years old, North West)

## Education

The education system in South Africa is often criticised for its poor performance, persistent inequality, poor infrastructure and lack of resources, particularly in public-sector schools.<sup>72</sup> In 2015, South Africa saw a surge in the number of protests by students demanding free tertiary education for those who cannot afford it, most notably the #FeesMustFall movement.<sup>73</sup> Although the issue of education was commonly mentioned by participants in all educational institutions and in all the provinces, it was of particular concern among university students and among participants in the Eastern Cape.

Participants often used terms such as 'poor education' and 'a lack of education' to describe the current state of education in South Africa. Of key concern, however, is the quality of education in the country. Young people commonly highlight the 'poor education' many of them receive in high school, and explain how this significantly disadvantages them and undermines their ability not only to find work, but also to access and make it through tertiary education:

I think the biggest problem that we have in South Africa is our education because there [are] large gaps between the children that have access to good education and those that don't and this places them at a disadvantage when it comes to employment and getting a good tertiary education. (Female university student, 24 years old, North West)

Education is our biggest problem. I wish to see the government bridging the gap between Model C schools and public schools by introducing a system that will provide equal-quality education. They should also increase the 30% pass rate and maybe make it 40% because people complete Matric and don't know anything. We must focus on education, we



should eradicate corruption and work on education. (Male FET college student, 24 years old, Free State)

A common sentiment among the participants is that the 'education system is failing'. They argue that government is not 'taking education seriously' as they highlight the issue of 'unskilled teachers' in the schooling system, and the lack of resources, such as textbooks, in many public schools. Students in public high schools and FET colleges regularly spoke about the poor quality of education received in some state primary and high schools, as well as the negative impact this will have on their ability to find jobs and improve the quality of their lives in the future. Participants across the categories of educational institutions and in all the provinces commonly mentioned this inequality in the education system. They also explained how the education that young people in urban areas receive is better than that received by those in rural areas and townships:

I think the most important problem facing South Africa is education. Our standard of education is so low; there are public schools in rural areas that are not attended to – public schools with no laboratories and no libraries. (Female university student, 18 years old, Limpopo)

I think the most important problem in South Africa today would be the schooling system. Having cousins that have gone to schools that do not really provide correct material for education, the repercussions I have seen today [are] that they are not in school, they are not even in high school or university and are in jobs that do not pay them the amount to keep a family going. (Female university student, 18 years old, Western Cape)

In addition to young people's concerns about the poor quality of education in South Africa, a recurrent concern is what they often term the 'lack of education'. Participants widely felt that many South Africans are not educated and that this lack of education has an impact on a range of other factors, such as getting a job, their understanding of voting, and issues of corruption, crime and poverty:

Education is the biggest problem that we face because we sit with thousands of uneducated people who battle to find work and this is because of a lack of skill and lack of knowledge. (Male university student, 18 years old, Eastern Cape)

Among FET college students in particular, 'lack of education' was a term used to refer to the challenges they continue to face in gaining access to tertiary institutions and institutions of higher learning. They mention how difficult it is for youth to further their studies because they 'do not have the money' and therefore cannot afford to pay the high fees to study in a tertiary institution:

In 2015, South Africa saw a surge in the number of protests by students demanding free tertiary education

I think we are still struggling. As black people we struggle a lot, especially when it comes to education. There are hardships that we have to go through every time when we have to access education. I, for example, grew up with no parents, I was raised by my grandmother, who has passed away, and now that she's gone it's very hard being alone and trying to get there like everyone else, especially if you're not educated – it's very hard. So, I think if the government and people as a whole can look at education and empower youngsters to get educated so that even our economy can improve [...] not to focus only on a certain portion of

people, they should focus on South African youth as a whole. (Female FET college student, 23 years old, Free State)

### **The need for change and improvement in South Africa**

As a follow-up to the concerns mentioned by the youth at the start of the discussion, we asked them what they would like to see changed or improved in South Africa by the time they turn 30. Young people commonly mentioned the concerns highlighted above as things they wanted to see changed by the time they are 30. Of particular concern, though, was the need for an improved education system, and better infrastructure and service delivery. They commonly reiterated the need for more people to be educated, for the number of primary and high schools offering free education to be increased, and for free education to be implemented at tertiary level. University and FET college students across the board were aggrieved as they mentioned that more needed to be done to ensure that young people have better access to funding and bursary opportunities. They were also critical of poor service delivery and inadequate infrastructure, and emphasised the need to improve both of these issues across the country, but particularly in rural communities.

# Section 4

To understand young people's attitudes towards politics, we asked participants to tell us whether they were interested in politics or not. Across all provinces and educational institutions, they generally agreed that they are not interested in politics. This was particularly so among high-school students in the Northern Cape.

## **Young people's attitudes towards and perceptions of politics in the country**

Young people generally feel that politics is 'full of corruption', and they refer to politics as a 'dirty game', 'a waste of time', 'a joke', 'disappointing', and as something they do not want to get involved in. They argue that politics is all about 'self-enrichment', a quick way 'to get rich', and see no reason why they should be interested in it because they 'gain nothing from politics'. Politicians were commonly referred to as 'corrupt' people who are 'chasing after the money'; 'liars' who are 'abusing the power' they have; and as people who make empty promises. For these young people, bad leadership, issues of corruption, such as 'nepotism', and crimes such as 'fraud' committed by the 'criminals in Parliament' are factors that deter them from taking an interest in politics. Young people also frequently mentioned that politics is something they 'used to be' interested in, but not any more:

I am not interested in politics. In the times of Steve Biko, politics were much more interesting. Those people knew what they were fighting for, they knew where South Africa was going and they had direction. Now, we are going nowhere. Our previous president Thabo Mbeki was an inspiration to me. He empowered people to be educated. What is empowering us about our president? To marry more women? I am not interested. (Male university student, 20 years old, Limpopo)

I was once interested in politics but then I lost confidence recently because of what I've observed. People who are in political parties are people who are much older than us, people whom you thought you could look up to. People whom we thought would go the extra mile to protect us, but at the end of the day you learn that they were all using us as born-frees and not helping us in any way. (Male high-school student, 18 years old, North West)

Among FET college and public high-school students across the provinces, politics was often identified as 'dangerous', 'violent' and filled with 'hate'. These students fear getting involved in politics or being associated with it in any way because 'people get killed in politics':

I'm not interested in politics because people who are involved in politics die. I know of someone who was burned, along with his tavern, by an opposition party for being part of the

political party that he was in, and it is because of such incidents that I don't want to be part of politics. They are full of violence, propaganda and corruption, and in that sense it really doesn't have any value. (Male FET college student, 24 years old, Free State)

There was a prominent tendency among the university student participants across all the provinces to be more interested in politics than the other groups of respondents. For these young people, an interest in politics is seen as important because it allows them

to be 'involved', and gives them a better 'understanding' and 'knowledge' of what is happening in the country. They believe that by being interested in politics the youth will be better placed to bring about 'positive change' and 'improvement' in areas such as 'education', 'bad leadership' and the current 'political landscape'. These young students see politics as a way of being 'heard' and a means by which the youth can 'make this country better' because it 'depends on them'. They are concerned about their future, and believe that, as youth, they need to be interested in politics, because if they are not, who else will bring about 'change'?

University students see politics as a way of being 'heard' and a means by which the youth can 'make this country better'

Definitely, I'm interested in politics personally. I feel that we are the future and we have to, we need to be interested ... it affects us, so you need to be informed about our political parties and what is going on in our country, and our community. Be informed about everything. So, I am interested in politics for those reasons. (Female university student, 21 years old, Free State)

[Politics] is everywhere, all around us. Even if you do not engage in talking about it, it still affects you. Being interested in it [politics] does not mean I go to rallies; I hear about it ... I find it interesting. In first year I did a course – intro to politics – and it was about understanding what politics [is] and what politics does, but in terms of the 'nitty gritty' of scandals, knowing the politicians, I do not find any of that interesting. (Female university student, 21 years old, Western Cape)

University students argued that they are politically aware of what is happening around them because it is 'everywhere in the media'. They read about it in news media, see it on social media and watch it on television. For them, 'everything involves politics' and this is how they are kept informed about what is happening in the country. They acknowledge the political history of South Africa as a contributing factor to why the youth 'need' to be interested in politics, and state that although they are 'disappointed' by what they see happening in politics, they need to be interested in politics to fight against crime and corruption, and to bring about change:

I am interested in politics because there cannot be change in isolation, without people who work toward that change. It is better to be involved, so that you can advocate for your views ... The key reasons [why I am interested in politics is because of] the crime and corruption happening. (Male university student, 23 years old, Limpopo)

Well, I am interested in politics, but my problem with politics is that our leaders don't provide the right leadership for us. They don't lead the way properly, you know. There's a lot of corruption in South Africa, so that's why the youth members are not interested in politics, but I am though. (Male FET college student, 20 years old, North West)

High-school students in independent schools also frequently mentioned that they are interested in politics – but not in South African politics. For these young students, there is nothing positive about South African politics, as the leaders ‘do not take their roles seriously’. Among public high-school students, their interest in politics is in the drama and ‘controversy’ that surrounds it. To them, politics is something ‘funny’ to watch. Despite these differing opinions, these young people commonly feel that if they were involved in politics they ‘could do better’:

I’m actually interested in politics because I find them to be quite funny at times, and I enjoy seeing blunders by some political leaders, and the controversial issues and secrets that come out. But I wouldn’t like to go into politics because politics are generally quite dirty. (Male high-school student, 19 years old, Northern Cape)

I am interested in politics because, as we sit here as the youth, we are the leaders of tomorrow, and as the leaders of tomorrow we need to learn from the current leaders’ mistakes, so that we can do better in the future. If we can be the president of tomorrow, then we can do better work than the current president ... (Female high-school student, 18 years old, Free State)

Young students across all educational institutions and in all provinces frequently identified government as something ‘separate’ and ‘far removed’ from them. For them, politics is seen as ‘too complicated’ while some participants mentioned that they ‘don’t understand it’. They emphasised, however, that the youth need to have some knowledge and understanding of politics, so that their vote can effect ‘change’:

I am interested in politics, but I take a less active, more passive role in my interest ... I do believe young people, especially now, should take a particular interest in politics, especially when you are going to vote – you need to have a basis for why you are voting, you cannot vote based on other people’s decisions. You need to have knowledge of politics and how the system is run, and how active or inactive political parties are, so that you as a young person can make an informed decision. (Female university student, 19 years old, Western Cape)

Yes I’m interested in politics but the thing is that we have a lack of information in terms of politics. I think the ruling party must step in to help us, educate us about politics. (Male FET college student, 24 years old, North West)

## **Youth and voting in the 2014 elections**

In the 2014 elections, the number of voters who turned out to vote decreased by four percentage points, from 77% in 2004 and 2009 to 73% in 2014.<sup>74</sup> Young people between the ages of 18 and 29 made up 6.4 million (25%) of all registered voters.<sup>75</sup> Among the first-time voters aged between 18 and 19, however, a mere 33% registered to vote.<sup>76</sup> During our discussions we wanted to get a sense of what young people think about the process of voting in South Africa. Do they see it as important and effective? Did they register to vote in the 2014 elections?

Across all provinces and educational institutions, participants in the study frequently agreed that voting is important. When asked if they had registered to vote or not in the 2014 elections, FET college and university students were more inclined to answer yes. By contrast, high-school students usually responded no. Although it is acknowledged that low registration levels among young people

is a global phenomenon, of key interest were the reasons behind why this is the case in South Africa.

## Reasons for voting

Students in FET colleges and universities across all provinces frequently mentioned that they 'want to see change in South Africa' and that this is why they registered to vote in the 2014 elections. For this group of students, voting is still the best way to bring about change and improvement in the country:

I agree [that elections can be an effective way of changing or improving South Africa]. I have seen change in my community. We did not have water but now we have water in our homes; in my community students study for free ... we now have clinics close by to our homes, everything is fine, things are going very well. (Female FET college student, 21 years old, KwaZulu-Natal)

Young people across all provinces and educational institutions commonly agreed that the election period is the best opportunity to 'get to know the leaders', who are often 'everywhere in the media'. They acknowledged that the youth need to 'take action' and become 'active citizens' because voting is the 'only way youth can get their voices heard'. They emphasised the fact that if people do not vote, then they 'cannot complain about their circumstances and how the country is run':

I think elections can be effective if we as young people participate because, from what I have observed, young people are not interested in voting but are complaining about a lot of things they would like to see change. If we unite as young people and vote, we can bring change. (Female high-school student, 18 years old, Limpopo)

Among FET college and university students, voting was often identified as a way to 'hold leaders accountable', 'eliminate corruption' and 'remove corrupt leaders':

I've registered to vote because it's the only system that will bring change ... Once you register to vote, you are saying you want to oppose what currently the government is doing ... I'm saying to register and vote is a paramount point for each and every citizen ... because we can't sit back and say, 'government is corrupt', and on the other hand we are not doing anything. We have to register to vote in order to oppose that corruption ... so that people can learn how to rule people in an honest way ... that's why I'm saying to register is very important. (Male FET college student, 24 years old, Gauteng)

If our government is corrupt it is a good thing for us to vote, to change the situation we are experiencing. (Male FET college student, 21 years old, Mpumalanga)

Interestingly, however, among FET college students, voting was identified as important mainly because it is seen as a way to 'get things' from government. These students frequently argued that it is important to vote because government is 'funding' their education. If they do not vote, they believe that they will not get 'employed', because government and municipalities will not 'give' them a job. These students argued that they should vote because their families would then be able to get 'grant money', which helps to feed them, as well as 'RDP houses', electricity and toilets. Among this group of students in particular, there was the perception that if the youth do not continue to vote for the current ruling party they and their parents would not continue to get any of these benefits.

The excitement around registering and voting for the first time was evident among high-school

students, referring to their first opportunity to vote as ‘a milestone’, ‘an unforgettable moment in my life’. These young people demonstrate a sense of pride in being able to register and vote, and acknowledge the sacrifices that were made for them to have this democratic right:

Yes, I have registered to vote. I’m not voting because it’s an option to vote, I’m exercising my right, activating my freedom of expression and I’m doing it for Nelson Mandela ... it’s the least I can do for him. (Male university student, 19 years old, KwaZulu-Natal)

Participants across educational institutions and in all provinces often questioned whether their votes would ‘influence the future of the country’ and whether voting would ‘make a difference’. They referred to the leadership of the country in their discussions and the need for ‘a greater opposition’, ‘for a party that will make a difference in people’s lives’, ‘a party that is determined to change people’s lives’ and one that will ‘provide basic services and basic needs to the people’. They are assertive as they speak and recognise voting as ‘a platform to express yourself’, one that ‘gives you the right to raise your voice’ as a young person:

I actually have registered to vote. It is my first time, so I am a bit excited to put my ‘X’ next to that party, and also I feel that that is the only voice we have to try to change things, to say this is what we want – we put our cross next to the party that we want to rule. (Female university student, 21 years old, Eastern Cape)

These young people also agree that a new generation of youth is emerging – ‘one not stuck in the old times’. This was particularly evident among high-school students in all the provinces. This group frequently mentioned that they are a generation that is more ‘open to change’ and that in order for the youth to see the elections as effective in South Africa, they ‘need to rid [them]selves of the mentality that there is only one party that can rule’. They acknowledge South Africa’s political struggle and the history of apartheid, but feel that a ‘change in leadership’ is necessary to bring about the ‘change’ they seek:

They acknowledge South Africa’s history, but feel that a ‘change in leadership’ is necessary to bring about the ‘change’ they seek

Voting can be effective ... from where I am standing, today’s youth are very educated, we are more educated than our parents were and, in saying that, we are not ignorant. We know, we can tell that there’s something wrong with our government. We just need to vote for a different political party ... I feel like we need to give them [other political parties] a chance to see if they’ll do a better job. (Female university student, 19 years old, Free State)

However, one should note that, although participants were generally ‘hopeful’ and still feel that their vote can make a difference, they frequently mentioned that education is the most effective way to change and improve South Africa. For these young people, if elections are to be seen as effective, citizens need to be educated, so that they can make an ‘educated vote’ and elect ‘suitable people’ who will ‘serve the needs of the community’ and ‘keep their promises’. They stress the need for people to use their vote effectively and elect ‘the right party’ – this should not be a decision based solely on the country’s political history, but on factors that will bring about change:

Yes, I agree that elections can be an effective way of changing or improving South Africa, but this can only be achieved if it is a fair election and the people voting have the same access to information about voting and the education to understand different types of parties. South Africa has not reached that stage as yet, so people stick with parties that they are not satisfied with. (Female high-school student, 18 years old, Western Cape)

Among FET college students, however, the idea of electing ‘the right person’ meant electing individuals who are financially stable and not ‘poor’. For them, electing people with a sound financial background means that they would be less likely to engage in corruption. As one student responded, ‘Yes, elections are effective but we need to vote for a leader that is rich and not poor – that way he will not spend state money on his personal expenses.’

## Reasons for not voting

In contrast to FET college and university students, some high-school students frequently identified voting as ‘pointless’. For example, they said that ‘there is no point [in] registering’ because ‘there’s no change’ to be had from voting. They used phrases such as ‘I’m not interested’, ‘it’s useless’ and ‘a waste of my time’ to express their views. For these young people, there is nothing that ‘encourages’ them to vote; government does not ‘keep [its] promises’, so why vote?

I do not think voting is important. ... I came to Cape Town when I was little; I have been living in a shack since I was small. We are still living in the same shacks. My parents were voting together with other people in my community but there is no difference. (Female high-school student, 19 years old, Western Cape)

One interviewee indicated that the only impact of elections was before they took place, when politicians were trying to win votes:

I do think that elections have a positive input in South Africa because, usually, most improvements throughout the country happen about two years before elections, where the ruling party wants to keep themselves in that position of being the ruling party. (Male high-school student, 19 years old, Northern Cape)

For these young people, elections are no longer an effective way of changing or improving South Africa, particularly in the current political landscape. They referred to the 1994 ballot as the point at which the elections were most instrumental and brought with them ‘change’,<sup>77</sup> particularly under the leadership of Mandela. They agree, however, that since then there has been little improvement or change:

I don’t think elections do all that much to change our country. I would like to put an example forward about the late Nelson Mandela. He did everything that is supposed to be done by the president. He did everything before he became president; he did not need elections to do that ... We have had four or five elections and there has not been big change ... it is a pity that we only see our government starting to do things during the elections. People have been asking for houses for decades and, suddenly, when they need votes from people they go delivering houses or they do whatever they do during election season. It is almost like blackmailing – ‘vote for us, we will give you a house’ ... that is something the government should be doing; that is why we voted for them in the first place. (Male high-school student, 18 years old, Eastern Cape)



Voting was important. Not any more. Back then when you voted, your voice was heard but now, it's the same thing. Whether you vote or not, there is corruption all the way. (Male FET college student, 19 years old, Mpumalanga)

Among some participants, however, registering to vote did not always translate into actually voting:

Yes, I have registered to vote but I don't think I'll vote because I live in kind of a village and it hasn't changed since 1994, so why will I vote? I'll only vote in order to change the president's life because he has recently built a R200 million-plus house while other people are suffering, so why should I vote? There's no change, I'm not changing my life, I'm changing someone else's life, so I will not vote. (Male university student, 18 years old, Gauteng)

I registered but I didn't vote because of one reason: I don't have time to vote for someone that doesn't care about me. (Male high-school student, 20 years old, Northern Cape)

I did register to vote but I didn't vote, as I felt that there is no party that deserves my vote, as none of them match the standards that I want them to. (Female FET college student, 19 years old, Mpumalanga)

These participants view voting as a mere formality: 'we know which party is going to win' because the 'majority of the people that vote' are 'stuck in the past' and 'uninformed', and vote out of 'loyalty' and fear that apartheid will

come back. They refer to the older generation and those without formal schooling in their discussions, who, they believe, lack information and understanding of the voting process and, in turn, fail to see the 'bigger picture' behind why they are voting:

'We are too stuck in the past to focus on the future. That is why we keep voting for the same party'

I have not registered to vote because I had an idea of which party was going to win; it was a 90% chance that it was going to win again. People are stuck in the past. Most of the people that voted for the party that is ruling our country right now are people who experienced apartheid or people who influenced their parents or grandparents about apartheid. We are too stuck in the past to focus on the future. That is why we keep voting for the same party every single time. (Male high-school student, 18 years old, Limpopo)

The majority of people who vote are not that informed. They vote out of loyalty despite problems with the party, so I do not think elections on their own will cause major change. (Male university student, 22 years old, Western Cape)

Corruption and poor leadership were frequently mentioned by participants across educational institutions and in all provinces in relation to the elections and their effectiveness. Young people are cynical about the leaders of South Africa and issues of corruption 'at the top'. They highlight these as factors that hinder the positive impact that elections might have in terms of changing and improving South Africa. In their discussions, participants commonly used disapproving terms, such as 'untrustworthy', 'greedy', 'manipulators' and 'power hungry' in reference to politicians and political leaders. They have a very despondent view of politicians and political leaders, who, they believe, 'use people to get to the top' and 'only think of themselves' while they 'eat the money' and

fail to keep the promises they make. For them, as long as corruption and bad leadership prevail, elections will not change anything.

FET college students and public high-school students see elections as something that 'only benefits politicians' and empowers 'people like the president', and not as something that benefits the citizens of South Africa. These young people refer to elections as a process that makes the 'rich richer and poor poorer', bringing little or no change to the people who vote for 'them' and put 'them' in these 'high positions':

I do not think elections can make a difference – the country is rotten, the leaders are untrustworthy, with this I think it is better if we do not vote for them because there is nothing that they are helping us with. They help themselves only. (Male FET college student, 21 years old, Mpumalanga)

The youth's disillusionment with political parties was particularly evident among high-school students: 'There's no difference between them [political parties]'; all they do is 'finger point' and 'criticise each other':

I have not registered to vote because I have not found a party that represents what I feel is needed in South Africa. For instance, there are parties that are formed out of anger, and most people vote on popularity and fear of change. Most people do not want change for a particular party because they believe they did this and they will always do this, even though you see they are not delivering. We will complain till hell breaks loose, some things will not change, and until [there is] a political party [that] represents what I need, what I feel South Africa needs, I will not vote. (Female university student, 19 years old, Western Cape)

Participants were generally negative in their comments on how the youth only matter to political parties during election time. For them, government does not involve the youth in politics outside of elections, but addresses them only when they 'need votes', abandoning them after the elections: 'they forget about us'. As one male respondent put it: 'I will vote, then nothing happens. No one cares about me, what I do, what I eat, it is just important during May. I know I am important now! You need my vote.'

This view was particularly apparent among public high-school and FET college students. They see political parties as 'manipulating our parents' and the 'uneducated people'. As one participant said: 'Political leaders only come to the rural areas and provide food during election time. After they have gotten our votes they forget about us.' They argue that for elections to be effective in South Africa, the 'mindset' and 'attitude' of the political parties need to change.

High-school students across the provinces commonly mentioned how they find the voting process confusing, as they 'didn't know which political party to vote for' and were 'not sure of where to register'. They reiterated the need for appropriate 'knowledge and education' surrounding elections and voting:

Yes, I think elections are effective but I think they can only be effective if the youth are well informed and educated. If you are not educated, you will vote for anyone but if you are well informed you can make the right decision. (Male high-school student, 18 years old, Limpopo)

They agree that the process of voting should be made 'easier', that there should be 'online voter registration' because 'the lines are too long' and that there is too much 'admin'.

# Section 5

This report presents an in-depth picture of young South Africans' perceptions of politics and seeks to understand how they participate in elections through voting. Although the findings suggest that young South Africans do not operate much differently from their older counterparts or from young people elsewhere, they do illustrate that a growing component of the youth have little partisanship or loyalty to the ruling party, that they are a constituency that is dissatisfied with the options that are available and that they may also be more predisposed to voting for opposition parties than are older South African citizens. The findings also reveal a youth segment that is increasingly frustrated and angry with the continued inequality, high unemployment rate, bad leadership, increasing crime and corruption, poor education and poor service delivery that many of them continue to experience.

These young people feel alienated and excluded from politics, and believe that they only matter to the political parties at the time of an election, when their votes need to be secured. Their frustration with the persistent socio-economic inequalities and insecurities they continue to face, particularly with regard to employment, is growing. For them, these frustrations entrench the notion that participating in a democratic process like the elections is futile, as it brings with it little to no change in their lives.

This section gives a brief analysis of the research findings.

## **Analysis**

Research on the political participation of the youth frequently points to instances of apathy and lack of political interest. The findings of this study suggest that young people in South Africa are not as apathetic as conventional wisdom would lead us to believe, but that their likelihood of participating in democratic processes, such as elections, is often dependent on their satisfaction with democracy, and the performance of the ruling party and political leaders in addressing the various socio-economic factors, such as youth unemployment, crime and corruption, among others, that directly affect them. Young people still identify voting as important and as an effective way to bring about change. They do, however, come from a generation that is enticed by action, and not words – and this is clearly illustrated in participants' responses. For them, if young people are to participate in democratic processes like the elections, they need to feel included, and that their grievances and the challenges they continue to face are being acknowledged and addressed. In instances where this inclusion is lacking, they are more inclined to see to their own interests, as they question the difference voting makes in their lives and those of their parents.

In South Africa marginalised groups, and more particularly young people, are increasingly turning to protests and demonstrations as a means to have their voices heard and their challenges

addressed.<sup>78</sup> According to the ISS Public Violence Monitoring Project, a programme that tracks the extent and nature of various forms of violence that take place in public spaces, as many as 2 880 incidents of public gatherings and protests related to housing, electricity and education, among others, took place between 2013 and 2015.<sup>79</sup> In 2014, in the lead-up to the 2014 national elections, as many as 146 incidents of public violence were recorded that were directly related to the elections. Many of these protests (the proportion is 71%) turned violent.<sup>80</sup> In 2015 the frustration and anger felt by many young South African students as a result of the persistent inequalities many of them continue to face culminated in what popularly became known as the #RhodesMustFall and, later, the #FeesMustFall movements. These social protests illustrated perfectly the critical role that young people play, or can play, in bringing about social and political transformation. Could this strengthened sense of using alternative ways to express their dissatisfaction suggest that young South Africans' confidence in the process of elections is fraying? What is clear from the present research is that the youth are questioning the effectiveness of the elections.

### **Impact of socio-economic factors on the youth's democratic participation**

The concerns about unemployment, corruption, crime, infrastructure and education voiced by the young people who took part in this research study have been identified as top problems facing South Africa, and priority areas for government to address in a number of other research studies.<sup>81</sup> Young people between the ages of 18 and 24 are also often identified as the group who are most concerned about unemployment and education, as these often have a direct impact on this demographic.<sup>82</sup>

During our discussions, participants, particularly those in public high schools and FET colleges, rarely acknowledged the positive changes that took place in South Africa after former president Mandela. They were instead often very critical about the lack of development since then and often cited socio-economic factors, such as unemployment, poor housing, inadequate public infrastructure and the dysfunctional public education system, as key areas that illustrate the lack of change in the country. Clearly, if things have improved, government has not succeeded in communicating this to communities, or communities do not experience these improvements.

In South Africa the disproportionate impact that poor education and high levels of youth unemployment have on young South Africans has been echoed in a range of research studies.<sup>83</sup> In 2013 a report published by the Centre for Development and Enterprise on South Africa's education crisis found that 'of 100 pupils that start school, only 50 will make it to Grade 12, 40 will pass, and only 12 will qualify for university'.<sup>84</sup> The report goes on to state that the number of 18- to 24-year-olds who are not in an educational institution, employed or in training, increased from 30% in 1995 to 45% in 2011.<sup>85</sup> With increasing numbers of young people dropping out of school or not qualifying for tertiary education, and even more who are unemployed, the growing burden these factors place on the state, such as rising income inequality and slow economic growth,<sup>86</sup> could be detrimental for the future of the country. In addition, our research suggests that socio-economic factors such as unemployment, poor housing and education have important repercussions on young people's political participation. There are signs that these issues have not only an impact on their affinity with the ruling party, but also on whether they will or will not vote in an election.

Participants frequently mentioned the inequality that prevails not only in education, but also in the unequal levels of infrastructural development between urban and rural areas. Negative perceptions among young people in FET colleges and public high schools have left many despondent about

the process of elections and the lack of change elections bring. Among these perceptions are allegations of false promises made by the incumbent political party, contrasted with the reality of failing infrastructure, such as substandard housing, provided to them by government. University and FET college students often referred to the ruling party as not taking education seriously, thereby failing the youth in the public-sector schooling system – those who are directly affected by poor-quality education. For them, this ‘lack of education’, together with the difficulties they experience in accessing higher education, serves only to entrench the existing inequalities between the youth in urban areas and those in rural areas.

Although one should take into account that the issues of education, unemployment and housing reflect the structural legacies of apartheid,<sup>87</sup> South Africa continues to lag behind many other sub-Saharan countries in the areas of education, healthcare, employment and income equality – and even more so at a global level.<sup>88</sup> In addition, the current situation in the country is widely perceived as one of weak leadership and poor governance, both at the national and local level.<sup>89</sup> So, while this young generation is often seen as one that is not as burdened with the baggage of the past as previous generations are, it is clear that many are still grappling with the legacies the past has left behind.

For young people to identify the elections and voting as effective ways of bringing about change, government departments need to be held accountable for their failure to effectively address the challenges the youth face, such as high unemployment rates, poor infrastructure and poor education. Young people need to feel that government is responsive to their needs. In addition, political parties need to engage the youth through dialogues at various educational institutions and other platforms, so that they too can help identify ways to effectively address the various social and economic challenges these young people face.

Young people have to feel that government is responsive to their needs

## Impact of corruption on the youth

According to the 2014/15 national Victims of Crime Survey, as many as 75.9% of the households surveyed held the perception that corruption had increased in the country in the three years prior to 2014.<sup>90</sup> In addition, 81.2% of the households surveyed believed that people engage in corruption as a means of getting rich quickly, and 77.9% as a result of greed.<sup>91</sup> In 2014 the number of households that had had to pay a government or public official a bribe (in the form of money, a favour or a present) to perform a service that they were legally required to perform more than doubled, from 4% in 2012 to 10% in 2014.<sup>92</sup> The households surveyed also felt that it was pointless to report incidents of corruption, as ‘nobody [would] care’.<sup>93</sup>

During our focus group discussions, young people often identified issues of corruption, seen in the form of nepotism and bribery, as contributing factors to the challenges they face, particularly unemployment. The youth are disproportionately affected, as public money that should be used to improve the quality of their lives often ends up in the pockets of individuals. Our research illustrates that young South Africans are becoming increasingly conscious of issues of corruption, particularly among the political elite. This was notable in the way they commonly illustrated an awareness of the current political issues facing the country, and often referred to corruption scandals such as Nkandla and ‘Guptagate’ in their discussions.

As a result of the negative impact that corruption has on their livelihoods, their future and the future of the country in general, young people often flagged these factors as the reasons why so many young people do not participate in politics or elections. For them, the positive role that the elections can play in the country is being significantly eroded by the issue of corruption. As long as there is corruption among the political elite, the youth will continue to see the process of elections as an ineffective way of bringing about change and improvement in South Africa.

Corrupt politicians and those who are not held to account pose a serious concern for the future of this demographic. The youth are critical of the lack of accountability among senior officials and politicians, and cynical of the political leadership, whom they see as 'power hungry', 'manipulative' and 'corrupt'. Corruption was also spoken about in a broader context, and in relation to a number of other concerns, such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, clinics, hospitals and police stations. Our research suggests that lack of accountability and continued corruption, particularly among the political elite, is having a detrimental impact on this next generation of young leaders.<sup>94</sup> Young people, particularly those in public high schools and FET colleges, often spoke about the youth engaging in acts of crime and violence because that is the only way they can make money or 'feed their families and put food on the table'. Not unlike the findings of the Victims of Crime Survey,<sup>95</sup> these young people also argue that the youth identify crime as something that brings with it 'an easy life', while a few even approved of this, and aspired to be like the 'corrupt' political elite. As one 19-year-old female student in Mpumalanga responded, 'I want to use the money as Zuma is using it'. According to a 20-year-old male student in Limpopo: 'If you want to have cash, you have to follow politics. You do not have to be academically good or good in English; you just need to be baptised politically.'

Young people are frequently depicted in the media as angry and violent, taking what they feel they deserve and are entitled to through acts of crime.<sup>96</sup> If young people are to play an active role in the fight against corruption, they need to see that there are consequences for those who engage in such activities. The political elite can play an instrumental role in illustrating this by holding political leaders to account. As long as they fail to do so, the anger, disillusionment and lack of trust that young people have in political leaders and the political system will persist.

Research shows that had all eligible voters aged between 18 and 29 voted in the 2014 election, their vote would have accounted for over a third (37%) of all registered voters, illustrating the potential power that this youth vote has.<sup>97</sup> Young people need to understand that, by voting, they can play an instrumental role, not only in holding political leaders to account, but also by improving governance. Civil society, NGOs, the IEC and other stakeholders can play a significant role in contributing to increasing young people's knowledge and understanding of democracy, and the key role they play in it. This can be done by disseminating accessible information, particularly among the rural youth, as well as through various workshops and seminars targeted at this demographic group.

## **Young people's interest in and understanding of politics, and declining confidence in government**

Young people's trust or faith in government plays an important role in understanding their political participation and potential for voting in successive elections.<sup>98</sup> This issue is also closely linked to the rising expectations and feelings of anger and frustration felt by this demographic. Research studies generally illustrate that the youth are no different from older generations with regard to their interest

in politics and feelings of alienation.<sup>99</sup> Research found in 2012, however, that as many as 72% of the youth aged 18 to 25 felt that Members of Parliament don't listen to people like them.<sup>100</sup> Consistent with our findings, other research illustrates that young people are increasingly losing trust in the country's leaders.<sup>101</sup> Citizens' trust in the president decreased from 62% in 2011 to 34% in 2015, so almost two-thirds of the country do not trust the president.<sup>102</sup>

In 2013 a Human Sciences Research Council survey highlighted that as many as 41% of those surveyed agreed with the statement 'after being elected, all parties stay the same, so voting is pointless',<sup>103</sup> while 43% saw voting as meaningless because 'no political party can be trusted'.<sup>104</sup>

Young people lack trust in the current political system, and feel they are engaged by political leaders and parties only at election time

Our research illustrates that even though young people identified voting as important, some of them did not always see it as something that would 'make a difference'. During our discussions, participants often mentioned their unhappiness with the country's politicians and elected leaders. They often referred to politics as 'a joke'. Political leaders were frequently identified as corrupt and criminal, and as individuals who could not be trusted, while voting was often seen as having little influence on their lives. These young people also commonly mentioned how unempowered they feel and alienated from formal political structures, and how their voices do not matter or are not heard. With all these factors at play, it is no surprise that young people are less likely to be interested in politics and voting.

Research also illustrates the importance of engaging the youth in political and democratic processes.<sup>105</sup> Globally, the rhetoric around the youth demographic, however, is that as they become more mature and grow older, they automatically become more engaged and involved in politics and democratic participation. What this rhetoric often neglects, however, is that for young people to become actively engaged in democratic processes and in politics, they need to be inspired by what they see – by the political parties and political leaders – and to be treated as serious political actors.

Young people need to be reminded about the history of South Africa by their parents and teachers, of how far the country has come, and the people who fought so hard to change the system of apartheid. Young people need to be inspired, so that they know how important their role is in ensuring democracy and the rule of law. This will also help them prepare for their role as active citizens in formal democratic processes, such as elections, and nourish their interest in politics. Young people do not feel sufficiently motivated to actively engage in politics. They lack trust and confidence in the current political system, and feel as though they are engaged by political leaders and parties only at the time of elections.

The youth are looking for a political party that speaks to their needs and the challenges they face, but also one that inspires them and that they can identify with. During our discussions it was clear that political parties and political leaders seem to have lost touch with this demographic. The young people whom we interviewed often criticised political parties for not robustly challenging the incumbent party. As long as political parties fail to actively address the concerns of the youth and give them something to identify with, such as their passion and vision to make a difference in their lives and better develop the country, young people will continue to feel as though they are mere votes and not an important part of the electorate.

There is an assumption that young people understand the election process, as well as their rights and responsibilities as citizens. During our discussions with young people in the various educational institutions across the country's provinces, it was evident, however, that young people lack a proper understanding of the voting process, as well as the role it can play in effecting the change that they want to see and that they so often refer to. As one 18-year-old female university student from the Eastern Cape said: 'I have not registered to vote, because if I did register and vote I would not be an informed voter. I've decided not to vote because I feel I do not know enough to make an informed decision.'

Interestingly, these young people were quite critical of how older people and 'uneducated people' vote. They would often refer to this as an uneducated vote, and one based on the political history of the country, as opposed to a vote that is used to effect change. They advocate appropriate 'knowledge and education' when it comes to voting, with what they term the 'bigger picture' in mind. However, in the same way that they are critical of these voters, some do not vote themselves, nor do they understand the power that their vote holds.

Although this research mainly points to political issues faced by young South Africans, particularly with regard to their distrust of political leaders and lack of identification with the political parties, it also highlights the low levels of understanding about elections among the youth and the power this demographic could wield with their vote. This research highlights that existing curricular strategies, which often only focus on young people's knowledge and understanding of politics, should also have a focus on the issues of trust and confidence in government and political parties. This may suggest a need to review existing civic and voter education programmes in schools, and to evaluate their effectiveness in generating democratically active young people who are aware of their rights and responsibilities. Targeted interventions among the youth in rural areas, who are not often exposed to, or do not have access to knowledge-sharing activities and platforms, should also be enhanced to encourage participation among this demographic.

During the 2014 national election, the IEC played a commendable role in encouraging young people to register and vote through its various social-media and other campaigns, as well as its annual Schools Democracy Week programme, held in the lead-up to the elections. Civil society and NGOs, as well as political parties, could also play a key role by engaging young people through seminars, workshops and interparty dialogues to create an interest in, and awareness and knowledge of politics, and the importance of democratic participation.

### **Importance of engaging the youth**

Among the young people who took part in this research study, it was clear in our discussions that by listening to them and engaging them in politics and on issues that directly affect them in their daily lives, they felt more acknowledged, as though their voice mattered. This became even more evident when, at the end of our discussions, they would often mention how grateful they were for having been given the opportunity to engage on issues that they felt directly affected them, and to be given a platform where they were able to speak with one another and gain some understanding of the importance of voting. In the words of some participants,

I'm happy for this opportunity. I think we should get it often, so we can express our feelings. I think what we have said here, it must be addressed – every comment that we have [made]. I'd



like to thank [the ISS] for this opportunity, it's not an opportunity that comes [often] – thanks very much for it. (Male university student, 22 years old, KwaZulu-Natal)

I think the study was a good idea because now even if they do not hear my particular comments, they will get an idea of what we feel. When we vote you just give a vote; it does not say what we would like to see happening; it does not say what your problem is and I cannot exactly run to the Union Buildings and tell them all about it. (Female FET college student, 19 years old, Mpumalanga)

I would like to conclude by saying that I appreciate what the ISS is doing because maybe through them our voices will be heard. (Male university student, 18 years old, North West)

By engaging the youth through the kind of dialogue platform that our focus groups provided, it was clear that many of them were able to develop a better understanding of the importance of voting and that they increased their understanding of democratic participation. The young people whom we spoke to often felt encouraged to give their decision not to vote more consideration; others decided to change their mind completely and go out and vote.

## Changing nature of partisanship among young people

Changing trends in political-party support have been identified by a number of scholars.<sup>106</sup> In a survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2011 in 19 African countries, poor performance by the current ruling party, particularly in terms of creating jobs, often resulted in people between the ages of 18 and 30 expressing no partisanship to or affinity with the ruling party.<sup>107</sup> The 2009 election in South Africa, which saw Jacob Zuma elected as president, illustrated the first signs of partisan support shifting away from the ANC.<sup>108</sup> In the 2014 national election, only one out of three eligible voters voted for the ANC; two out of three either abstained from voting or voted for opposition parties.<sup>109</sup> This illustrates that young people are not the only group demonstrating the changing nature of partisan support.

Young people typically tend to hold the same political views as their parents, and therefore vote along similar lines. There are, however, indications that this may be changing. For example, in 2012 an Institute for Justice and Reconciliation survey illustrated that as many

as 58% of young people surveyed mentioned that they would consider supporting a different political party from the one they had previously supported.<sup>110</sup> The youth who took part in the present research study are also representative of a generation of young people who are more open to changing their political allegiance than are their parents. This was particularly evident among first-time voters between the ages of 18 and 19. As one 19-year-old male high-school student from Mpumalanga said: 'I am interested in politics because I would like to end one party ruling forever.' Although they acknowledge the history of apartheid and the changes that took place after apartheid, they often mention that their struggle is different from the one their parents faced, as they are now fighting for social and economic freedom. During our discussions, young people would also mention a need for younger political leaders with whom they can identify. This could also be seen as a factor that influences their partisan attachment.

The youth who took part in this study are representative of a generation who are more open to changing their political allegiance

If political parties want the support of young people, they need to engage them on their level and address the issues that directly affect them. Young people are looking for a political party that acknowledges them and listens to them. It seems that with new political competition and the arrival of new radically different political contenders, voters are now more open to challenging traditional party loyalties.<sup>111</sup> As one 18-year-old male high-school student from Limpopo said:

I think elections are effective. The ruling party for the past five years has been relaxed. By taking a stand and voting, ... we give more power to opposition parties and that on its own makes the ruling party deliver [on the] promises made to citizens.

The impact of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is a clear example of how loyalty to the incumbent political party is shifting among young voters, particularly when one considers that in 2014 young people accounted for 49% of EFF supporters, compared with 30% in the case of the ANC and 14% in the case of the DA.<sup>112</sup> During the 2014 national election, the EFF secured 1 169 259 (6.35%) of the total votes, placing it third on the list of political parties and making it an official contender to both the ANC and the DA.<sup>113</sup> If political parties do not effectively engage these young people, the status quo will remain, and their lack of participation in elections will continue.

It is important to note, however, that even though young people are illustrating shifting patterns of partisan support, this may not always translate into votes or support for an opposition party.<sup>114</sup> During our discussion, young people often mentioned that, although they registered to vote, they may not or did not vote come the election, as there wasn't a contending political party that they could identify with, or one they believed would bring about change.

## Conclusion

This research study sought to understand the voting behaviour of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 in South Africa. Through a selection of responses, comments and statements made by the participants who took part in the study, a clearer understanding of what drives young people to vote, and whether they see democratic processes, such as elections, as effective in bringing about the change they so yearn, could be gained.

This study illustrates that young people are growing increasingly frustrated with the high levels of unemployment, poor education, bad leadership, and crime and corruption that continue to plague South Africa. However, although young people acknowledge the importance of voting as a means to bring about the change they want to see, our findings illustrate that they often do not identify voting as the best way to achieve this change. There is a clear trust deficit among this demographic: for them, the loyalty they have witnessed among their parents and older groups towards the ANC has brought with it little improvement in their access to basic services and, most importantly, in the quality of the services provided. As a result, for this group, engaging in political and democratic processes such as elections is often not identified as the best option for changing things in their lives or those of their parents.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Information sheet

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) would like to invite learners/students (18–24 years old) in ... (name of educational institution) to take part in a study titled 'Understanding the factors that influence the voting behaviour of young South Africans'. The study is funded by the Government of Finland. Ms Lauren Tracey is conducting the study under direction of Dr Chandré Gould, both of the ISS's Governance, Crime and Justice Division.

Through this study we hope to better understand the factors that influence young people's (18–24 years old) views and attitudes towards democratic participation and voting in the 2014 elections.

Since young people make up a large proportion of voters, understanding how they feel about the election and their participation in it is important. Young people have been depicted as being disengaged from conventional politics on the basis of findings of surveys. However, survey data cannot tell us why this might be. This research aims to add context and depth to existing quantitative research.

Data will be gathered through focus groups and one-on-one discussions. Each focus group session will be digitally recorded and will be 45 min long. Participation in the focus groups will be voluntary and participants are free to opt out of the study before, during and after their initial participation. The school as well as each participant's name and identity will not be used in any research reports and participants' will not be asked to reveal who they will be voting for in the 2014 elections.

Results of the study will be published in April 2014 and will be made available to the school and participants.

## Appendix B: Questions

- What do you think are the most important problems in South Africa today?
- What would you like to see changed or improved in South Africa by the time you are 30?
- Do you think having elections can be an effective way of changing or improving South Africa?
- Are you interested in politics?
- Have you registered to vote?
- Why do you think voting is/is not important?
- What would you say are the most important issues you would like addressed in this election?

## Appendix C: Informed consent

### Understanding the factors that influence the voting behaviour of young South Africans

You are invited to participate in research conducted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). Ms Lauren Tracey is conducting the study under direction of Dr Chandré Gould, both of the Governance, Crime and Justice Division of the ISS. The study aims to better understand the factors that influence young people's (18–24 years old) views and attitudes towards democratic participation.

If you decide that you would like to participate in this project, you will be asked to participate in a focus group or one-on-one interview facilitated by one of the project's researchers. Focus groups will comprise no more than ten participants and the researcher, who will be accompanied by a translator or an assistant. If you agree to be interviewed outside of the focus group set up for the project, this consent form will apply to each of your interviews.

1. Your involvement in this research project has been fully explained to you and you freely consent to participate.
2. If you decide to participate, your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation. This means that you can refuse to answer any question and/or may choose to stop participating at any time, without saying why.
3. Agreement to participate in one or more interviews outside of the focus groups means that you will be asked about your life and your experiences in relation to democratic participation. You will not be asked which party you support or which party you will vote for.
4. You understand that no benefits are guaranteed to you because of your involvement with this project and that you will receive no payment in lieu of your participation. There are no costs involved in your participation in this project.
5. You understand that your confidentiality will be respected and protected. You understand that this means that your identity will be concealed in all published and written work resulting from this study. All project materials (e.g. interview tapes and transcripts) will be kept under tight security (in locked cabinets in a locked room at the Institute for Security Studies).
6. You understand that you can obtain the results of this project after its completion by calling or writing to the Institute for Security Studies (whose address is on the business card you have received).
7. If you have questions regarding your rights as a subject, any concerns regarding this project or any dissatisfaction with any aspects of this study, you may report them confidentially if you wish to the head of the Governance, Crime and Justice Programme, Gareth Newham, PO Box 1878, Brooklyn Square, Tshwane 0075.

I understand the above information and voluntarily consent to participate in the research project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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### About this monograph

This monograph provides a detailed picture of young South Africans' perceptions of politics and of the factors that influence their participation in elections. Through responses and comments made by South African students aged 18 to 24 in rural and urban areas across all the nine provinces, readers gain a clear understanding of what drives some young people to vote and what discourages those who do not. These accounts confirm some of the reasons that deter certain young people from voting, including political withdrawal among South Africa's youth; low levels of trust towards government and its lack of responsiveness to their demands; declining partisan support for the ruling party; and signs of dissatisfaction with the options other political parties offer them.

### About the author

Lauren Tracey joined the ISS in April 2009 as a Sarah Meek fellow, and then as a researcher in the Arms Management Programme in 2011. In May 2012 she joined the Governance, Crime and Justice Division of the ISS as a researcher. Her research focuses on issues of governance, particularly as it relates to the youth and their democratic participation in South Africa. She holds a BA (honours) and postgraduate diploma in international relations; and is currently completing her master's in developmental sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand.

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