



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### ***Automatic voter registration: removing the thorn in the side of SA's democracy***

***By Daryl Swanepoel***

A prerequisite for high quality elections is that all eligible voters must be on the electoral register. After all, voting is a constitutional right in South Africa. But experience shows that some voters also need help to get into a position where they can actually use their voting right.

Currently, we have a declining voter turnout. In the 2019 general elections, at face value it doesn't look like it was a bad turnout, with 66% of *registered* voters having voted. But, when you look at the figure including all *eligible* voters – eligible meaning adult citizens over the age of 18 – it drops to about 46%. The turnout at the local government elections in the same year was even more abysmal, with only 45% of *registered* voters going to the polls, dropping to a horrifying 32% when considered from the perspective of the number of *eligible* voters who took part.

Around one-third of the people who are eligible to vote in South Africa are not on the electoral register and therefore cannot vote. This is not good enough for a country that claims to be a democracy.

Elections should be considered a kind of conversation among the citizens of a country, where it is discussed and decided who shall form the political leadership during the next term – a conversation that is important for the emergence of democracy and social cohesion. If some citizens cannot participate in that conversation, the political leadership will have less legitimacy and credibility, and the citizens will have less trust in them to run the country effectively.

South Africa's poor election turnout has not improved over recent years – despite many registration campaigns by the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) – so it is high time to realise that the only solution to get a more realistic view of, and to better gauge, the state of democratic participation in the country is to shift to a more reliable, inclusive system: automatic voter registration.

This system, proposed by experts both locally and abroad, means that the state takes steps to ensure automatic registration of all eligible voters onto a voters roll. It is done in different ways in different countries, but it is normally done by linking voter registration to the existing national ID or social security system. The idea is that everybody in the country is already registered, with all the necessary information, so there is no need to duplicate the system.

To clarify, this is not compulsory voting, which one should avoid at all costs. Voters are still free to vote or not to vote – as they should be – but automatic registration means that the entire adult citizenry can go and vote, even if they only decide to do so on election day. They don't need to have registered beforehand, and they can react to what is happening during the election campaign and go and express their opinion, if they wish.

The other benefit of automatic voter registration is that the Department of Home Affairs will have easier access to more up-to-date information about citizens' whereabouts. It is required of you to notify the department of a change of address, but in reality, nobody does this. So, in the process of ensuring that everybody in the country is actually registered as a voter, one can also ensure that there is a better reflection of where those people are situated in the country as people change their addresses on the voter registration lists.

A concern some have iterated, is whether this system will fuel fraud. The answer, on the whole, is no. In order to avoid fraud within the automatic voter registration system, when a person dies, they are deleted automatically from the national register. And therefore, also from the voter register. So, a person cannot come with a claim, for example, for their deceased grandmother, because she would have already been deleted from the voter register automatically. And on the other end of the spectrum, when a person turns 18, they will automatically be registered as a voter.

This does not mean that fraud cannot happen. It depends on the system. In Denmark, for example, the only way it can happen is if a person's voter card gets stolen. The system automatically sends out a voter ID card by mail with all your information on it, which you take with you when you go to the voting station. In theory, a person may be able to go and vote for another person using their stolen voter ID, but it's a very rare occurrence in other countries where this system is being used.

A more important question is: How can we introduce automatic voter registration when Home Affairs is functioning, or rather, not functioning the way it is? It is not something that could be immediately implemented or even set up long before the next election. Rather, it requires that structures be put in place first that can handle the new system. It would not necessarily have to be within Home Affairs that these structures are set up, it could be some other body. It could even be something the IEC takes on. But, whichever body takes on the task, it would have to be properly capacitated and funded to do so.

Certainly, automatic voter registration would require legislation and decisions of a very complicated nature, but the current situation, where more than half the population is not voting, from a democratic point of view, a serious problem, and one that has to be dealt with. It will be a thorny process to salvage our democracy, but it is what should be done, because we cannot continue as we are.

***Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws on the content of the Institute's recent workshop on elections and coalitions.***