

# Damned to desperation

## The gendered nature of disruptive politics among South African youth

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South Africa's youth are often portrayed in the media as being at the forefront of xenophobic attacks, looting foreign-owned stores and participating in social movements and disruptive protests. Young men are identified as more likely than young women to engage in protest action. This study explores the complexities young people face and that often drive them towards engaging in protests as opposed to participating in formal democratic processes like elections.

## Key findings

- ▶ Young people feel absent and silenced on formal democratic platforms. Their need for visibility and acknowledgement drives many of them to protest.
- ▶ Young people are growing increasingly frustrated by the high rate of youth unemployment and the continued lack of access to higher education.
- ▶ Young women are still at the periphery when it comes to meaningful economic and political power.
- ▶ Young men's exposure to violence in the home, community and among their peers has resulted in the normalisation of violence as a means of resolving conflict or expressing grievances among this group.
- ▶ The perceived unresponsiveness of local leaders in addressing the needs of the youth, or the community as a whole, plays a key role in driving young people's participation in protests.
- ▶ The need for a more competitive party system that is extremely responsive to the demands of the electorate is clear from these young people's responses as they illustrate how the current quality of political parties in South Africa is lacking and therefore failing to attract new disgruntled voters.

## Recommendations

- ▶ Civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) and the South African Police Service (SAPS) must make the youth aware of their rights regarding protests, as well as the consequences of using violence during such activities.
- ▶ Government, civil society organisations, NGOs and the SAPS must work together to ensure that violence prevention initiatives are aimed at youth of all ages.
- ▶ The IEC's registration drives focused at school level should consider the different ways in which young people experience politics and protests.
- ▶ The IEC, civil society and NGOs should increase caregivers' and family members' awareness regarding their role in urging young people to vote.
- ▶ The education department, IEC, civil society and NGOs need to review existing civic and voter education programmes in schools to evaluate their effectiveness in generating democratically active young people who are aware of their rights and responsibilities.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ Political parties and leaders must engage young people on platforms that they use and identify with, such as the internet and social media, or through dialogues where they can directly engage with political leaders and parties.
- ▶ Government, political party leaders and the IEC must prioritise gender-related issues by removing all barriers that discriminate against the participation of women in politics.

## Introduction

South Africa faces serious challenges to the quality of its democracy. The growing concern with the effects of state capture and a lack of accountability for wrongdoing among the political and business elite continues to cause social and political instability across the country.<sup>2</sup> The ruling African National Congress (ANC) is experiencing a decline in voter confidence, as seen during the past two elections.<sup>3</sup>

Communities are increasingly turning to public protests to express their dissatisfaction.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly true for the youth, who are often seen participating in social movements and disruptive protests.

Well-known examples include the #FeesMustFall movement which resulted in the destruction of property estimated at around R600 million<sup>5</sup> and the violent protests in Vuwani, Limpopo, where over 20 schools were burnt.<sup>6</sup> Young people are also often portrayed in the media as being at the forefront of various xenophobic attacks and looting foreign-owned stores.

In the 2014 national and provincial elections and the 2016 municipal polls, young people between the ages of 18 and 29 made up 10.9 million and 11.8 million respectively of the eligible voting-age population. However of this number only 6.4 million (58%) in 2014 and 6.3 million (53%) in 2016 registered to vote.<sup>7</sup>

Young people's political expression appears to differ between men and women. Young men are identified as more likely than young women to engage in protest action. There is also greater voter participation of young women than young men in elections in South Africa.

The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) data on registration and turnout shows a slightly higher propensity to register and to vote among young women compared to young men.<sup>8</sup> However, overall continuously low levels of youth participation in formal democratic processes such as elections suggest that South Africa's democracy is not nearly as inclusive as it could be.

Young people could fundamentally change the political landscape if they used their ballot to support their policy preferences and hold political parties accountable. However, given the substantial socio-economic challenges they continue to face and after more than two

decades of democracy, some young people are cynical about South Africa's political leaders.

This was a significant finding from a recent Institute for Security Studies (ISS) study of 277 focus groups and 49 one-on-one interviews among 2 000 young people between the ages of 18 and 24. It also found that many young people see public protests as a viable alternative to express their grievances and motivate for change.<sup>9</sup>

The aim of this study is to build on this earlier research with a particular focus on understanding the gendered nature of young people's political participation in South Africa. This was done by assessing the experiences, perceptions and motivations of young males and females between the ages of 18 and 29 in six communities that experience high levels of disruptive protests in Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Young men are identified as more likely than young women to engage in protest action

The objective of this qualitative research project is to contribute context, depth and richness of young people's experiences, perceptions and motivations that result in their preference for disruptive political expression. It will also allow for a deeper insight into the complexities that young people face and that often drive them to engage in protests.

The research also aims to get a sense of young people's motivations behind their voting behaviour and of their voting intentions in the lead-up to the 2019 polls.

It is envisaged that the findings of this research will provide appropriate policy recommendations and interventions to reduce violence and promote democratic engagement ahead of the elections.

The questions that guided the research included: Why do young people vote or not? Why are young people turning to protest action as opposed to voting? What are the gender differences in attitudes and behaviour in relation to the first two questions?

The findings confirm that young people find informal platforms of engagement more effective and attractive

than formal democratic processes, such as voting in an election. Promises of a brighter future are often weighed against the lived realities of high levels of unemployment and the need for education and equality.

The report reveals the gendered nature of young people's political expression. Young men are often perceived to be much more likely than young women to engage in a protest or demonstration, while young women seem more willing to vote than young men.

This gender gap is also evident in the IEC data on registration and turnout which shows a slightly higher propensity to register and vote among women. For example in the 2014 national election, the gender gap in actual participation was significant, with women making up at least 57% of all voters while men accounted for 43%.<sup>10</sup>

## Background

Youth voter turnout has historically been the lowest worldwide. This trend has particularly been identified in democratic countries such as Britain, Canada and the United States.<sup>11</sup> At a global level, young people in particular have been identified as apathetic and uninterested in voting, and possessing low levels of political interest, knowledge and understanding.<sup>12</sup>

Young people's lower levels of political participation have also been identified as part of the life-cycle effect of their political participation. This means that as young people grow older they gain more experience in the electoral and political process, as they accumulate more resources through life and their levels of education increase.<sup>13</sup>

For some researchers, however, political participation is not decreasing but rather shifting from elections to non-electoral forms of action.<sup>14</sup> These new forms of participation include:

- Voting.
- Campaign activities such as volunteering to talk to prospective voters and leaving them with campaign materials.
- Contacting officials directly.
- Communal activities in the form of grass-roots democracy where community members get together to

collectively address their needs. These can be anything from school issues to the environment.

- Protests and other forms of contentious politics where the public plan and organise an activity that transcends conventional political boundaries, such as a march or public demonstrations.
- Internet activism, which allows people to carry on traditional political activities by connecting with others electronically as well as by gathering and sharing information in an attempt to influence political processes.<sup>15</sup>

While these are regarded as informal types of participation, they may serve as stepping stones to more formal platforms of political participation such as voting later in life.<sup>16</sup>

As young people grow older they gain more experience in the electoral and political process

In South Africa it has been argued that young people are not politically apathetic, but rather are fed up with formal political platforms that continue to sideline and alienate them.<sup>17</sup> Scholars say that young people's lack of political participation on formal democratic platforms is often due to wider socio-economic challenges such as youth unemployment, poor-quality education, corruption, crime and safety.

While for some researchers young people's lack of political participation is due to the scepticism many people have of political leaders who they see as non-responsive, lazy and concerned only with enriching themselves.<sup>18</sup> These factors among others have been identified as playing a role in young people's withdrawal from traditional forms of political activity such as elections and voting.<sup>19</sup>

Research highlights how protests in South Africa, especially just before an election, are used as a mechanism to get redress and attention from government as well as to attain improved service delivery.<sup>20</sup>

These researchers highlight how protests, particularly at a local level, are as a result of the inefficiency and

ineffectiveness of municipal and ward committees and leaders who are identified as invisible, corrupt and uninterested in addressing the community's concerns.<sup>21</sup>

Party identification is also seen by some scholars as playing an important role in voting behaviour.<sup>22</sup> Social identity theory argues that partisan ties are often similar to identifying with things such as social class, religion and other social groups.<sup>23</sup>

Some young South Africans are fed up with formal political platforms that sideline and alienate them

Research shows that party ties are established in the early years of childhood development and that parents often play a central role in shaping these partisan identities.<sup>24</sup> The party identity of adolescents and young adults, it suggests, is more likely shaped by their peers, friends and co-workers.<sup>25</sup>

In a recent Afrobarometer survey conducted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, among 1 800 South Africans between August and September 2018, over half of South Africans (53%) do not feel close to any political party, with just under a third of South Africans

(29%) feeling close to the ANC. The majority of non-partisans 'are in urban areas, youth, with a secondary or post-secondary education. A third reside in Gauteng.'<sup>26</sup>

## Methodology

As indicated above, the aim of this study is to understand the gendered nature of young people's (18 to 29 years) political participation in South Africa. To achieve this, the study used a qualitative research design to explore the experiences, perceptions and motivations of the youth that result in their preference for disruptive political expression, as opposed to participating in formal mechanisms.

## Data collection

This qualitative research study involved 209 young people between the ages of 18 and 29 in six communities identified as having high levels of public and collective violence – Meadowlands, Atteridgeville, Actonville, KwaThema, Katlehong and Eldorado Park.

These communities were identified using data collected by the ISS Protest and Public Violence Monitoring tool<sup>27</sup> which has been mapping all forms of protests, crowd-based disruptions and public violence since 2013. The study involved the in-depth analysis of 120 semi-structured one-on-one interviews across all six sites.

**Table 1: Number of one-on-one interviews per site**

Site		Meadowlands	Atteridgeville	Actonville		Kwa-Thema	Katlehong	Eldorado Park		Total
Race		Black	Black	Black	Coloured	Black	Black	Black	Coloured	
Gender	Male	10	10	10	1	8	11	5	5	60
	Female	11	10	7	1	12	9	5	5	60
Employment status	Student	5	7	6		7	7	5	1	38
	Employed	9	9	8		6	7	4	4	47
	Unemployed	7	4	3	2	7	6	1	5	35
Language	Afrikaans				1				1	2
	English	14	10	9	1	15	13	6	9	77
	Sepedi		5			2				7
	Setswana	3	4							7
	Sotho	1		2				1		4
	Xitsonga	1								1
	Xhosa					1	1			2
	Zulu	2	1	6		2	6	3		20
Age range		18–28	19–29	20–28		18–27	19–29	18–29		

**Table 2: Participant demographics of the focus group discussions per site**

Site		Meadowlands	Atteridgeville	Actonville			Kwa-Thema	Katlehong	Eldorado Park		Total
Race		Black	Black	Black	Coloured	Indian	Black	Black	Black	Coloured	
Gender	Male	10	9	5		1	7	6	8		46
	Female	8	9	5	1		6	8	2	4	43
Employment status	Student	8	7	3			4	3	1	2	28
	Employed	5	6	1	1		7	7	4	2	33
	Unemployed	5	5	6		1	2	4	5		28
Language per focus group	English			2					1		3
	Setswana	1	2								3
	Zulu	1					2	2	1		6
Age range		20–28	18–29	19-28			19–28	18–27	19–27		

In addition, 12 focus group discussions were held among 89 young people. The groups were divided as follows: eight of the focus groups included four female-only focus groups and four male-only focus groups conducted in Meadowlands, Atteridgeville, Actonville and Eldorado Park. The remaining four focus groups, which were divided equally between KwaThema and Katlehong, involved a mixture of males and females. This allowed for a comparison between male and female participants, as well as a better understanding of how they engage across gender lines.

The focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews were conducted at selected community halls, local municipalities and schools in each of the six communities. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in the language of instruction that the participants felt most comfortable engaging in, with a large majority being conducted in English, followed by Zulu, Setswana, Sepedi, Sotho, Afrikaans, Xhosa and Xitsonga. Interviews were also digitally recorded.

### Sampling and analysis

Quota sampling, which allows for data to be collected from a sample group that represents certain characteristics of the population,<sup>28</sup> was used in this study to identify and recruit a mix of young people by gender, employment status and age.

The bulk of the participants recruited were between the ages of 20 and 29 with a smaller proportion coming from the age group 18 to 19. Every effort was made to ensure that at least 50% of the participants were young women.

Participants were recruited with the help of an experienced partner and community-based organisation called Phaphama Initiatives. The organisation has a community footprint and access to a database of community constituencies, networks and youth groups in all six of the identified locations that allowed for a random selection of participants.

Participants were asked a range of questions about their engagement in elections and voting as well as whether they had, or knew of someone who had, taken part in a protest or demonstration for any reason in the past two years. Questions were kept open-ended, allowing the participants to openly engage with the topic.

The bulk of the participants recruited for the study were between the ages of 20 and 29

Data analysis for this report is based on 120 in-depth one-on-one interviews which were transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis was used to identify common categories in each of the interview transcripts. The data was then organised under common themes, and quotes were extracted and marginally refined and reduced to emphasise the points made under each thematic area.

### Ethical considerations

Only young people over 18 were approached to participate in the study and were given an information sheet explaining the nature and purpose of the research.

Thereafter, all willing participants were asked to sign an informed consent form, stating that they understood the nature of the study, before taking part in the focus group discussion or one-on-one interviews. Participants were reimbursed for their transport costs to the venue and provided with a lunch pack. Participants are not identified by name in this report.

The findings are not representative of all youth in South Africa and only speak to the sample of young people located in the six communities listed.

### Factors driving youth voter turnout

In the lead-up to the 2019 general elections, political leaders have repeatedly called on young people to make their voices heard at the polls. Ahead of the 16 June 2018 Youth Day celebrations, ANC President Cyril Ramaphosa called on the youth to keep the legacy of the 1976 generation alive by stating that ‘young people should join the ranks of active and responsible citizens by participating in democratic structures and processes like elections, as well as be active leaders in the fight against crime, substance abuse, corruption and acts of violence’.<sup>29</sup>

In his address to the youth ahead of Youth Day celebrations, Democratic Alliance leader Mmusi Maimane listed the challenges young people continue to face, such as poor-quality education and unemployment, and stated that it ‘falls to each and every young South African to learn from the class of ’76 and take matters into their own hands’. But, he went on, ‘I don’t mean go out and protest. I don’t mean use violence and put yourself in danger. I mean use your true power.’<sup>30</sup>

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have played a notable role in targeting and mobilising the disgruntled youth. As political analyst Prince Mashele writes, they have ‘understood that more than two decades of democracy in South Africa has produced a large reservoir of uneducated, jobless young black people who are disgruntled with the ANC’.<sup>31</sup>

They have also made education fashionable, with many of their members, such as spokesman Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, one of the youngest members of the party, recently obtaining his PhD in politics.<sup>32</sup> EFF leader Julius Malema has also announced that he will be working on obtaining his master’s degree.<sup>33</sup>

This has only served to boost the confidence of the political party regarding its support base in the lead-up to 2019. However whether the party will continue to be a kingmaker and garner more votes among the youth in particular in the coming election is still debatable.<sup>34</sup>

During our research, it was important to get a sense of our young respondents’ voting behaviour and whether they participated, or not, in the last South African national and local government elections.

Political leaders have repeatedly called on young people to make their voices heard at the polls

We also wanted to get a sense of their voting intention in the lead-up to the 2019 elections, and what the motivating factors were behind whether they would take to the polls and vote in 2019, or not.

### Youth participation in the 2014 and 2016 elections

A large majority of the study’s participants mentioned that they had voted in the last 2014 and 2016 national and local government elections. This was particularly evident among female participants.

Nevertheless, the participants were generally quite despondent about formal democratic processes such as the elections. They typically struggled to identify it as a process that would bring change in their communities and improve livelihood opportunities.

However, regardless of their dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of voting, the participants generally agreed that it was still important to vote in South Africa.

I think [voting in an election is important] because you are electing a leader for your community or for your country and that’s important because you don’t want someone who is corrupt or you know that will just let the country go down the drain. We need to vote for someone who is fully capable and has what it takes to lead a country or a community. (Female student, 19, Eldorado Park)

Yes, it [voting] is important not only for us [but also] for those who are growing up. ... We need change in this society; we need to start having

things like a sports ground and stuff like that and grow academically. ... Maybe more young black companies you know ... they must just give us funding and stuff so that we can start our own businesses. (Unemployed male, 24, KwaThema)

The need for 'change' was an overarching theme across all participants. It was stated as one of the main reasons behind why these young participants voted in previous elections as well as why they will be voting in 2019.

The issue of 'change' was mainly spoken about in relation to the need for more job opportunities and free tertiary education, while a few mentioned the need for better service delivery, housing and infrastructure.

During the discussions, the role that family members played in urging and pushing the participants to vote in previous elections was evident. Some participants highlighted that while they had voted in the past national and local government elections, it was often only as a result of their parents or family members pushing them to do so. Their discussions suggested that were it not for this push factor, they may not have gone out and voted.

I: Did you vote in the past two elections, so the 2014 local election and the 2016 national elections?

P: Yes, I did vote, my aunt made me vote, she said, no man you can't be sitting there, let's go, let's go.

I: If your aunt hadn't invited you would you still vote?

P: I don't know, I would have stayed at home. (Employed male, 24, Atteridgeville)

Because at that time I was staying with my grandmother and she would always tell me to vote and remind me that everything that I have is being bought by social grant money so I should vote. So I felt guilty and then I went and voted. (Unemployed female, 26, Katlehong)

According to research conducted by Collette Schulz-Herzenberg on the effects of social networks on voter behaviour, political discussions within people's immediate networks such as family and friends play a key role in shaping their perceptions about political parties and election campaigns.<sup>35</sup>

Her research illustrates how in South Africa this has a particularly important impact on political attitudes such as partisanship as well as voting and voter turnout.<sup>36</sup>

The interviews also revealed the lack of understanding and information some of the participants have about elections and voting. This was not only around the actual process of voting, but also regarding its purpose, particularly around the question of 'What will/does voting do for me?'

### 2019's election is significant for South Africa as it celebrates 25 years of democracy

This acts as a deterrent for some as they feel they lack the necessary understanding as to why voting is important. These young people also said the only reasons they voted in the last election was because 'everyone else was doing it', and that they were just 'following the crowd'.

I: Okay, will you be voting in the 2019 national election?

P: I will be voting. But I don't see any reason to vote.

I: You don't have a reason why you are going to vote in 2019?

P: Voting is not explained properly to us youngsters – we are just told go and vote; but why are we voting? We are never told why we are voting. (Female student, 23, KwaThema)

For some, political promises about potential benefits were the main driving force behind why they had voted and would vote in future.

Yes, it is important to vote because not only does it secure us but it also helps when you apply for a job because they do ask if you have voted or not. Like the other day I was in an ANC meeting, and they explained that if we keep attending the meetings and vote, we will get jobs. (Unemployed female, 29, KwaThema)

For many people, next year's election presents a significant period in South Africa as the country will



be celebrating 25 years of democracy. Unfortunately, however, while there is still a clear desire among some young people to vote, little has changed regarding their perception around the effectiveness of elections and voting.

In 2014, ISS research found that young people often don't identify voting as the best way to bring about socio-economic change in their communities or country.<sup>37</sup>

In October 2018, the Gauteng Provincial Legislature, in partnership with the *Mail & Guardian* and IEC, hosted a Critical Thinking Forum in Vosloorus which brought together people of all ages from across the community.<sup>38</sup>

The discussions illustrated the frustrations and anger felt by young people regarding the rhetoric around voting, and the lack of socio-economic change it brings.

One of the panellists, young local TV presenter Jessica Mthimkhulu, explained, 'When we talk about politics we hear these big words like legislature and policy and protocol ... but how do these things help us when we are trying to make decisions? What convinces people to set schools alight, or to burn tyres because they are angry? I'll tell you what it is: the change is happening too slowly. So if you are not going to do this for us, see our anger. See the flames.'<sup>39</sup>

## Parents have a significant influence on young people's interest in politics and citizen habits

The above response highlights why young people are open to engaging in violence in instances where voting is seen to be ineffective in bringing about the change they want.

Family also plays an important role in exposing young people to the process of elections, as is shown above. As much as voting behaviour is driven by young people's daily issues and challenges, parents also have a significant influence on their interest in politics and habits regarding citizenship.

The discussion held with these young participants highlighted the instrumental role parents play in readying young people for their civic duties by exposing them to voting from a young age.

Their responses suggest that parents should insist that their kids go along with them to the voting stations in the same way that some insist that their kids go to church with them from an early age.

This approach could help get young people interested in politics, as parents share their views on voting and how they make their decisions on who to vote for.<sup>40</sup> This could also prove more beneficial than civic courses in sharing knowledge and gaining a sense of understanding and awareness about voting, as well as in implanting a sense of duty and responsibility.<sup>41</sup>

## Youth views about voting in 2019

In March 2018 the IEC held its first voter registration weekend, with 2.7 million voters responding to the call to register or update their registration details.<sup>42</sup> Of the new votes registered, 400 000 (82%) were under the age of 30, and about 54% of these were women.<sup>43</sup> As of November 2018, just over 26 million citizens had registered for the 2019 national elections.<sup>44</sup> Of this, 5.2 million are between the ages of 18 and 29, with young females making up 2.8 million and young males 2.4 million of all registered voters.<sup>45</sup>

In 2019, tapping into the potential youth vote will be especially crucial for political parties, as this demographic will make up a substantial proportion of the eligible voting age population. As such, their impact at the polls cannot be understated. Understanding whether these figures are a true reflection of young people's intention to vote in 2019 was therefore an important part of this study.

During the interviews, most of the young participants said they would be taking to the polls and voting in the 2019 election, with more females than males demonstrating their eagerness to vote.

When asked why they would be voting in 2019, two of the top motivating factors identified by these young participants were the need for employment, and the perception that new and more job opportunities were on the horizon.

This was followed closely by the announcements made late last year by then president Jacob Zuma that all poor and working-class South Africans would be granted free tertiary education.<sup>46</sup>

Among the genders, young females, particularly those who are unemployed, identified jobs and the need for better salaries as key motivators for them to vote in 2019.

[My main reason for voting in 2019 is that] the employment issues [need to] be solved, our salaries [need] to improve. For example, our salaries didn't go up in April, so maybe since we have a new president there will be changes, and [in] our workplace there will be changes. (Employed female, 27, Katlehong)

Of course [I will be voting in the 2019 election], the main reason is this policy of free education. That will be my main reason of voting in 2019. You know our government is taking baby steps to implement things. But ever since they spoke about this free education at tertiary level ... it's one policy that I can say is more implemented than others. There are many policies that are there in the constitution of South Africa, and in the constitution of the leading party, but you find that such policies ... are not implemented. They go to policy conferences, they sit in boardrooms and go out but they do not implement. But now that my brother is getting his education free at UKZN, for once I have seen [the] change that I was looking for since [then]. (Unemployed male, 26, Katlehong)

There was a clear sense of optimism among both the young male and female participants particularly regarding the change in leadership in the ruling party and the popularity of the new president, Cyril Ramaphosa.

Young males were however more inclined to highlight the change that would occur because of the newly elected ANC president, with many of them seemingly buying into Ramaphosa's 'new dawn' and the perceived change it would bring.

I: You mentioned that you didn't vote in 2014 and 2016. What would be your main reason for voting in 2019?

P: CR17 [Cyril Ramaphosa].

P: When he speaks, he shows the meaning that I'm bringing change. I'm focusing more on the unemployed youth ... young guys, uplifting a community. Hence, I said there's

more youth developments than before now; as I speak from the past six months, in Tsakane we have two new youth development centres, you see there's changes now ... . (Employed male, 26, KwaThema)

I: What is your main reason for voting in 2019?

P: I believe there will be change. I believe that a lot of change is going to happen since we also have a new president. There will be the creation of new jobs, women will be treated fairly, and there will be an improvement in the community. (Employed female, 24, Meadowlands)

Young people often mentioned that they want their voices to be heard and see 2019 as an opportunity to raise their voices and to address the challenges they face. Others mentioned that they are older now and feel more mature and aware enough to understand politics and the need to take part in elections.

Some said 2019 would be their first time voting in an election. As one unemployed 23-year-old female from Meadowlands said, 'when you vote, that's the only time when your voice will be heard'.

There is a renewed sense of optimism among the youth following the appointment of Ramaphosa

The responses above highlight how positive leadership can get young people more excited and involved in politics and voting. They indicate a renewed sense of optimism among the youth following the appointment of Ramaphosa. But it is yet to be determined whether this will translate into more young people going to the polls or voting for the ANC come election day.

In 2016, ISS research indicated that young people were becoming increasingly cynical about political leaders and the lack of accountability among senior officials.<sup>47</sup> This cynicism may also have grown following young people's exposure to the Zuma era and the legacy of misrule and corruption that his administration has left behind.

This is supported by a recent survey by Citizen Surveys, a Cape Town-based research company that specialises in

large-scale, national quantitative and qualitative research studies.<sup>48</sup> The survey indicates that while Ramaphosa is still one of the most supported political leaders, his job approval rating as president dropped to 62% at the end of September from 68% in the preceding three months.<sup>49</sup> Support for the ANC also dropped from 64% in April and June 2018 to 58% by the end of September.<sup>50</sup>

### Youths trust in the IEC

Most of the young participants agreed that they trusted the IEC and the way it ran the elections. Their trust was often based on the IEC's perceived reputation as an organisation that had been running elections since the first democratic elections in South Africa. These young people felt they had no reason not to trust the organisation.

They were the institution in 1994, they delivered peaceful elections, we've been having peaceful elections from 1994 regardless of those isolated incidents. But it's not their duty to make peace; it's the duty of political parties to make sure that there's peaceful elections ... I think they are a good institution. I trust them, I trust them very much. (Employed male, 27, Actonville)

Yeah, I think so, because they have done this for years and they have never given me a reason or the country a reason not to trust them hence they say your vote is your secret. I think they keep it that way. (Female student, 22, Katlehong)

A small proportion of the participants, however, do not trust the IEC. These young participants saw the IEC as a corrupt institution where bribery was a key feature and politicians were able to buy votes.

[No, I do not trust the IEC] because most of them are funded by the ruling party if you check. So, you can't really trust them, they can say ... you guys have to make sure that we win the election. (Unemployed male, 21, Meadowlands)

No, I don't because the people who assist us when we go vote ... they are obviously affiliated with a specific party, so they can do some corruption to make their party win. Because everyone in South Africa has the right to vote, just because you work for the IEC, it doesn't mean they can't vote. They can steal the ballot papers. Let's say I'm working at

the IEC, you can bribe me to sway votes towards a specific party because they don't get paid a lot of money. (Employed male, 19, Eldorado Park)

A few participants also mentioned how they did not trust the post-election vote-counting process due to its lack of transparency. They highlight how ballots have gone missing in previous elections, and how this doesn't foster trust in the organisation.

For some young people, the lack of change after an election led to the perception that their vote didn't work

During the discussions there was often a sense of confusion when young people were asked to comment on their knowledge of the IEC. Among the small proportion of young participants that didn't trust the IEC, this lack of trust could be due to a lack of understanding of the IEC's roles and responsibilities.

### Why young people protest: grievances and triggers

Globally, young adults who are interested in politics are rejecting formal platforms of engagement in favour of informal platforms such as protests, social movements and informal organising.<sup>51</sup> This is according to recent research conducted by the global journalism organisation Orb Media involving 979 000 people in 128 countries.

The study also highlights how the generation gap between youth and adults is widening as more youth choose informal politics while older adults avoid protesting.<sup>52</sup>

Participants in this study mentioned that protests often occurred as a result of the failed promises and lack of delivery from political leaders and parties following an election. For some of these young people, the lack of change after an election brought on the perception that their vote didn't work and as a result deterred them from going back and voting in the next election.

[They voted and then] their demands were never met, then they started protesting. So, obviously they will never vote [again]. They'll tell you, I will never vote for this guy because

he will never fulfil my demands again do you understand so I don't think they would vote. (Unemployed male, 28, Meadowlands)

Obviously as a political party before elections you will come and promise if you vote for us we will do this and this. And all of the issues that you are facing, like the issues of electricity, will improve. If you vote you have that hope that I voted for this party and they are in power now and those things that we are facing we won't face. If I face something and I voted for you, you are failing me; there are specific services that we need and if I don't get those small services, you have failed me as I have put you in power and I believe that if you are in power everything will go the right way. [If it does not] I am going to protest so that you must hear! (Employed male, 25, Eldorado Park)

These responses suggest that young people withdraw from voting altogether if the promises made by politicians do not materialise, rather than shifting their vote to another party. This speaks to the potential for and quality of competitive party politics in South Africa.

Their responses show that the current quality of political parties in South Africa is lacking and therefore failing to attract new disgruntled voters. This suggests that there is potential for a more competitive party system that is extremely responsive to the demands of the electorate.

Among those who had taken part in a protest, young males were in the majority. Of those who hadn't taken part in a protest or demonstration, many had been asked to participate by friends, family members and local political party leaders. The reason for refusing to participate in public protests had to do with the fear that they would get hurt because they saw protests as dangerous.

### Exploring perceptions and experiences

To explore gender differences regarding the engagement of young males and females in protests, participants were asked whether they believed there were any differences in the reasons behind why young men and women engaged in protests. While most participants, both male and female, agreed that the issues were often the same, there were some differences.

Some young women were identified as only engaging in protests that revolved around issues of rape and abuse, the well-being of children, housing and concerns of safety. This view was slightly more prevalent among young males than it was among young females.

Male participants would also often state that women were 'smarter' and would rather talk about their concerns. If they did participate in protests it would be more likely to be in a peaceful manner with marching and singing involved. Both males and females commonly held the perception that young males often took part in protests for money and jobs and that their involvement in protests was more likely to be 'violent.'

### Young people withdraw from voting altogether if the promises made by politicians do not materialise

The participants were generally very descriptive about the steps they had taken to get their concerns and challenges addressed in their communities or how they would bring it to the attention of government.

For many, taking to the streets and protesting was not typically their first approach at raising a grievance. They frequently emphasised that they would first approach their local ward councillor, local leaders or municipality.

Uhm ... [the] community leader – I would talk to him first. Because he is nearer to the problem, he's the one that understands how the community thinks and works. I'm guessing he would know what problems [there are] or how to come up with solutions that work for the community. (Unemployed male, 21, Meadowlands)

... It doesn't just get to protesting first, they go to the offices, the government offices to report whatever problem they have and then if they don't see an action, then that's when they start protesting. (Employed female, 25, KwaThema)

The responses above are important to note because they suggest that engaging in a protest is a result of a lack of responsiveness from those with the authority to address a grievance.

Concerns around the inefficiency of local government in addressing demands were often raised in the study. For some, engaging with government was not worthwhile or identified as the best way to get concerns and challenges addressed.

[The] South African way is through a protest. ... That's how the government gets to hear the dissatisfactions and when people are not satisfied with service delivery. The local governments are failing. (Unemployed male, 27, Actonville)

For a few, perceptions of corruption at a local level and among local leaders was the reason for not approaching local councillors to address concerns.

... It is very difficult to bring up the burning issues that we have as a community ... because of the corrupted leaders. There is like that thing that if you are the local councillor, I come and I report the issues that you know are our problem. But, because you know that [person and that] her position will be affected and you are friends it doesn't directly get to her, you understand. So, the only way [we] will catch your [local councillor] attention especially these corrupted leaders, the ones that don't give us the attention, we just protest because now we know it will be nationally recognised and it will shake them out of their comfort zone. (Employed female, 22, Atteridgeville)

According to research conducted by Afrobarometer in 2016, as much as 73% of the 2 400 participants interviewed identified with the statement that 'most' or 'all' local government officials were corrupt.<sup>53</sup>

### A common concern for young females is the need to be heard by political leaders at both local and national levels

Qualitative research conducted in the same year examining young students' knowledge and understanding of local government and local governance yielded similar results.<sup>54</sup> It also highlights why some young people start to turn towards more informal options such as protests to get their demands met.<sup>55</sup>

The responses presented above show how young participants' dissatisfaction, frustration and anger with local leaders play a role in determining whether some young people decide to take to the streets and protest or not.

Disillusionment with the current political system was commonly mentioned by participants as a key reason that many people engaged in protests and demonstrations. A key factor mentioned was the need to be heard by political leaders at both local and national levels. This was a common concern for young female participants.

We want to be heard! We clearly think way better than a man should and why do we still have a male president. Why haven't we had a female deputy president at least by now? (Employed female, 22, Actonville)

If it means for us to be heard, yes [I will protest]. But I don't think they will even hear us. (Employed female, 22, Eldorado Park)

They mention with frustration that government does not listen to the youth or take them seriously and that protests or strikes are the only way to get government to listen to them and address their demands.

I think the only [way to get government's attention] is to strike. ... the government understands striking. Because when we talk, they will just listen to you and say it's fine. But the moment you take action and strike, that's the moment they come and listen to you and then promise to do something and if they are not doing it again, we strike again then they will understand this is serious. (Employed female, 26, Actonville)

Participants also commonly stated that the high rate of youth unemployment, the need for jobs as well as free, quality education, is often a driving force behind why young people engage in protests.

For young females in particular, however, in as much as the issues of employment and free education are top concerns, they mention that even when they are employed, their struggle for better salaries and equality within the workplace continues.

Nowadays there is a lot of corruption. It is difficult to find jobs; you need to have connections inside

in order for you to find a job even if you've got diplomas or a degree. You don't just get a job if there is no one you know inside. Sometimes you find that it is a male person who says if you can give me this, I will give that, which is sleeping with him, so it's no longer that easy. (Employed female, 24, Meadowlands)

Among young male participants, both employed and unemployed, there was a common sense that the reason behind young males' engagement in protests was often just an opportunity to commit crime such as looting foreign-owned stores as well as vandalising and destroying property. For some, engaging in a protest was even identified as something fun to do.

Some of them protest just for the fun of it; they [are] just fascinated by being part of a crowd. [Just the other day] we were protesting as Shoprite employees, [and] some of the youth our age who don't even work with us were also part of the protest – without knowing the reason for the protest. (Employed male, 29, Atteridgeville)

Most of the young people in this community they protest just to loot those foreign people's shops, yes most of them. Because most of them are unemployed, most are dropouts, they feel like they don't have a life, they feel like it's the end of the world and they can't do anything. They have that kind of mentality that if you have dropped out of school, it's the end of life [and] you can't do anything, you have to hustle to have money. (Unemployed male, 22, Atteridgeville)

During the interviews, young males were often referred to as the ones that resort to using violence and other forms of destruction during protests. Participants commonly mentioned that it was because they were angry, frustrated and naturally more aggressive than women. For some the role that substance abuse, particularly drugs, played in making young people more violent and allowing them to act with reckless abandonment was key.

The issue of drugs was brought up as a key concern in communities such as Eldorado Park, Meadowlands, Katlehong and Actonville. These participants also demonstrated a clear lack of trust in institutions of authority like the police during their discussions, with

police often perceived as working with and being on the payroll of drug dealers in the community. Others perceived police as corrupt and taking part in the looting during protests.

... My biggest problem is drugs here; there are many police in South Africa saying that they are going to finish crime, crime will never end, you know why I'm saying that? I'm saying that because some of our police here in South Africa, they have something going [on] with those people that are selling drugs here in South Africa. Instead of the police [going] and arresting the person with weed or with any drugs they go there and take money from those people. (Male student, 25, Meadowlands)

### One reason behind young males' engagement in protests was often just an opportunity to commit crime

[During a protest] there's a lot of groceries, there's teas, there's everything on that policeman's van. So, you see they chase you then they take for themselves. There's a friend that I had and she told me that if you come to my home, there's a lot of things, there's DVDs, those things came from the police! They just say put them aside for us, we will come and collect them later. Like ah really, they are stopping people from stealing, but they are stealing themselves. (Female student, 22, KwaThema)

For some young people, violence in a protest only starts once the police arrive at the scene. These young participants held the perception that police antagonised an already volatile situation and that police should first find out or understand why the protest is happening before opening fire.

Violence starts when people see the police and start getting shot with rubber bullets. When the police come they find that the roads are blocked; then the police will ask them to remove those things, and when they don't, the police will start shooting. (Male student, 27, Actonville)

- I: And who do you think perpetrates the violence in a protest?
- P: Police, yeah, I blame them.
- I: Why do you think police are the ones that perpetrate the violence?
- P: Whenever they are called about a protest, they don't get there and want to understand what's going on. I mean we're all humans; we need to get there, ask what's going on, try to understand the matter, try to have like a way of solving it. So, they [police] get there and don't try to understand, they want to fight actually and then sometimes they use weapons to fight whereas the community doesn't even have anything and then it turns into something major.  
(Female student, 19, Meadowlands)

Employed male participants were the only group to highlight how their parents' engagement in protests during the apartheid era may have served as an example of what is needed to be done to get government's attention.

A few young male participants mentioned that it was because of young males' exposure to violence in their communities and homes that they were susceptible to engaging in violent protests and reckless behaviour.

In the past, our parents were protesting for change, [and] some things changed but not all of them, so as youngsters we want to join that movement of change so that our parents can retire from that. So that maybe we can come up with a different strategy on how we can change what our parents were doing so that the message can be heard. (Employed male, 20, Atteridgeville)

Some of them it is peer pressure, my friend is there [so I will also] take part. Some of them you can find that, that person has negativity from home, everyone from home is negative, there is no clear role model and someone who can give them clear advice. And also, I would say it's a matter of people want to voice out a specific thing, those issues that I was talking about; electricity, education, issues of water going unannounced. (Employed male, 25, Eldorado Park)

The high rate of youth unemployment continues to be one of the most serious threats to social stability in South Africa as it results in the exclusion of young people in the economy.

This study highlights how youth unemployment promotes participation in protest action. Some young people highlight how discouraged youth have given up on seeking employment and instead opt to take part in protests and committing crime as a means to 'hustle and have money'.

These responses also show that young women are still at the periphery when it comes to real economic and political power. Worryingly, some young women say that at times they are forced to have sex with men in order to get a job.

Women constitute the majority of the voting electorate, as seen in the 2014 national elections, where women represented 13 938 303 (54.9%) of the total registered population while men made up 11 451 847 (45.1%).<sup>56</sup> In addition, more female youth between the ages of 18 and 29 were registered as compared to their male counterparts.<sup>57</sup>

### Young women are still at the periphery when it comes to real economic and political power

Yet in the 2014 national elections, women's representation in parliament dropped four percentage points compared to its 2009 high of 44%.<sup>58</sup> In the workplace, the scenario is not much different.

The second-quarter 2017 Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) released by Statistics South Africa reveals that while women fill a meagre 44% of all skilled posts in the country, this figure has not shifted since 2002.<sup>59</sup>

In the second quarter of the 2018 QLFS, women occupied one in three (32%) of the managerial positions.<sup>60</sup> The 2018 QLFS goes on to highlight that the labour market in South Africa is still more favourable to men and that men are also more likely to get paid employment than women.<sup>61</sup>

Research also reveals that about 99% of all children in Soweto, Johannesburg, have experienced violence

before they turn 18.<sup>62</sup> The Birth to Twenty Plus cohort study was conducted by the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development on the longitudinal perspective on violence in the lives of children in Soweto.

It illustrates how children's experience and exposure to violence in the community, home, school and among their peers has adverse effects not only on their social stability, but also in normalising and desensitising them to violence as they get older.<sup>63</sup>

Indications from our findings illustrate that young males' involvement in protests, and in those that turn violent, in South Africa has at least some of its origin in what they witness in their communities, homes and among their peers. Some young people become desensitised to violence and events such as looting associated with protests because it is seen as the norm in their community.

## Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to understand why young South Africans vote or not during an election and why some turn to protest action as opposed to voting. Of key importance was the need to identify the gender differences in the attitude and behaviour of these young people in relation to the above concerns.

The narratives reflected above show consistencies with earlier research demonstrating how anger and frustration can result in the youth seeking alternative forms of political engagement to get their voices heard and the challenges they face addressed. This includes through protests, strikes and demonstrations.

Their anger relates to the perceived ineffectiveness of formal democratic processes such as elections, the need for their voices to be heard, and their ongoing cries for employment opportunities and free education.

The findings suggest that while some of the young people in this study still see value in voting, they are disillusioned with formal democratic processes such as elections. As a result their potential to shape elections goes largely unfulfilled.

According to the IEC, in as much as young people turned up in their numbers at the first session of voter registration in March this year, they still account for the lowest number of registered voters.

Those between the ages of 18 and 19 currently account for 15.6% of the estimated eligible voting population, while those between 20 and 29 account for 56.7%.<sup>64</sup>

This research highlights how even though these young participants acknowledge the importance of voting and the fact that they will be voting in the 2019 polls, their turnout rates come election day do not illustrate that.

This suggests that somewhere between registration and voting day, the likelihood of young people engaging in politics can be influenced by their experiences with political parties and leaders, their life circumstances and the change or lack thereof occurring in their communities.

While some young people still see value in voting, they are disillusioned with formal democratic processes

Where their need for 'change' is not met – particularly in areas that directly affect them, such as job opportunities and free, quality education – the young participants in this study may be less likely to engage on formal democratic platforms.

This study highlights the need to look at more interesting ways of engaging with the youth about politics. Young people may respond better to participating in formal democratic processes if the importance of voting is explained to them from a young age by their parents and elders, and at school.

This could also help young people build their confidence and understanding about the voting process and how to engage with it on election day.

There's a clear indication that young people are fed up with waiting for change to occur. Change for this demographic is identified as 'happening too slowly'. The almost immediate response from political leaders following a protest or strike has resulted in young people perceiving this method of political engagement as more effective than voting.

This leads to young people being more likely to engage in protests than voting in an election. This suggests a need to evaluate existing youth programmes and school curricula and to include the values required for a thriving and morally based citizenship.



Many young people are coming of age politically without a clear understanding of their roles as citizens in a democratic system. The responses in this study raise critical issues regarding South Africa's school curriculum and the lack of impact that existing civic and democracy education is having on the youth.

The education department, the IEC, civil society and NGOs need to review existing civic and voter education programmes in schools to evaluate their effectiveness in generating democratically active young people who are aware of their rights and responsibilities.<sup>65</sup>

This study also shows that young people respond well to being invited to participate in political discussions that aim to understand the challenges they face. Young people want to be included and engaged at a political level.

However, their responses show how silencing the youth on formal democratic platforms can have a detrimental effect on young people's political participation and be a key driving factor behind their engagement in protests.

Violence during protests has become quite normalised, particularly among young males

Young people are a powerful resource and political leaders need to acknowledge the role they can play in decision-making processes at especially national and local levels. Effectively engaging young people on platforms that they use and identify with could go a long way to changing their perceptions about politics, politicians and social transformation. These include the internet and social media, or dialogues where they can directly engage with political leaders and political parties.

These findings suggest that young people need better knowledge and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of institutions such as the Electoral Commission and the police.

The Electoral Commission will need to evaluate the implementation of their national communication and education campaign aimed at encouraging the

participation of the youth. This is especially in the way it describes the inner workings of the election process, such as the process of counting.

This could be done by sharing with the youth the training material used to guide electoral staff and volunteers on the voting process in preparation for voting day. Where the police are concerned, there is a need for more community engagement and youth dialogues that inform communities about the mandate and role of policing during protests, and the role of police to ensure public safety. These steps could go a long way to improving trust levels in these institutions.

This study has also gone some way to illustrate how different young males and females are regarding their engagement in protests. Of concern is the fact that violence has become quite normalised, particularly among young males who are often more likely than young females to engage in violent protests.

This suggests a need for civil society and non-governmental organisations, the IEC and the South African Police Service to make young people aware of their rights regarding protests and demonstrations. They must inform them of the consequences of using violence during such activities. It also demonstrates the importance of making violence prevention initiatives a priority not only for adults but for children and youth of all ages.

It is clear from the responses above, and as South Africa approaches the 2019 elections, that young people reflect the diversity of wider South Africa. They are not all cut from the same cloth. This could translate into heterogeneous voting patterns among them.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has been identified as the ANC's one big pull factor due to his popularity.<sup>66</sup> But will this be enough to sway young voters in the lead-up to 2019? Should Ramaphosa explicitly launch a youth voter campaign in order to attract the youth vote? The same could be asked about the Democratic Alliance, and more particularly the Economic Freedom Fighters.

However, based on the interviews above, and with at least half a year to go before the 2019 polls, the top three political parties will be hard-pressed to hold on to their political dividend, particularly where the demands of the youth are concerned.

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### Acknowledgements



#### Australian Government

This report has been funded by the Australian Government's Direct Aid Program. The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government. The ISS is also grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union and the governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

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