

THE 'WHY' OF VOTING



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afesis-corplan
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INTRODUCTION

Afesis-corplan is a developmental non-government organisation (NGO) based in East London, South Africa, whose work is aimed at strengthening local governance and basic service delivery. The organisation's work over the years has increasingly moved beyond the provincial boundary and has a national footprint. Afesis-corplan has been in existence for over 30 years and prides itself for its resilience and the transformative nature of its work over the years.

As part of its agency building and strengthening of constitutionalism and democracy work, Afesis-corplan developed this pocket guide to respond specifically to the questions 'why must we vote?' and "what then after we vote?". These are questions that we are often asked by many in the communities where we work. This material is designed such that it responds, in a simplistic way, to the questions noted above. While the focus of this material is to encourage voters to participate in the local government elections in particular, it also has relevance for all elections including the national vote.

The first chapter deals with the idea of democracy and the different types of democracy, chapter 2 deals with the importance of elections and the reasons why people should vote and the third and final chapter deals with oversight and accountability post elections.

This material is specifically designed to appeal to the heart before it appeals to the mind and it is for this reason that it is not written in a legalistic manner. The authors could have very well bombarded the reader with many clauses in law that speak to elections. Such material would have probably offered almost the same content as what is contained herein but it would have missed the heart-appeal that the authors were going for. This approach is central to Afesis-corplan's intention to change behaviours and mindsets by changing the ways that we think. We only change our ways when we are absolutely convinced that we should.



CHAPTER 1:

UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY

South Africa is a democracy; this means that it has a system of government in which the whole population governs, often through elected public representatives. A democracy therefore is that system of government in which the people either have the authority to choose their governing legislators or the authority to decide on legislation. The word democracy itself means 'rule by the people'. Often in South Africa we talk of a government of the people by the people and indeed this is a simple way of explaining what a democracy is.



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TYPES OF DEMOCRACIES

There are various types of democracies across the world and not all democracies are the same. Yes, the foundational principle in any democracy is the participation of citizens in decision-making. The levels of and the mechanisms for that participation differ and so do the legal instruments that regulate that participation. Below are some of the different types of democracies.

1. DIRECT DEMOCRACY

A direct democracy is a form of democracy in which people decide on policy and legislation directly through referendums, citizen initiatives and the likes. This differs significantly from the majority of established democracies across the world where law-making is done through elected representatives. Switzerland is an example of a country with instruments for direct democracy. Citizens there have more law-making power than in a typical representative democracy system. This type of democracy is not the most practical one and thus is not very common.

2. REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

Central in the notion of a representative democracy is the principle of elected persons representing a group of other people in law-making. In a representative democracy, citizens vote for public representatives to whom they give power and a mandate to make laws and policies and to

govern. The source of authority therefore is the citizens who vote individuals into power. Once voted into office, there are limited opportunities in between elections that the citizens have for removing the elected representatives from office. In this form of a democracy, elections are an important hiring and firing moment.

3. CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY

A constitutional democracy is one where the authority of the citizens and that of the elected representatives is regulated through a legal framework and institutional mechanisms that ensure the rights of individuals and minorities are respected. In a constitutional democracy, the ultimate source of authority of government remains the citizens who must still vote public representatives into power. So, elections still remain a key moment to hire and fire public representatives. The powers of these elected public representatives is however kept in check and is limited in structured ways. Powers are separated amongst different branches of government with each branch having primary responsibilities and specific functions such as legislative, executive and judiciary. Usually, there are other checks and balances that are created through various institutions which all have an oversight function over the activities and decisions of the public representatives. A constitution would also establish mechanisms for leadership succession which often happens through elections.

4. MONITORY DEMOCRACY

A monitory democracy is a type of democracy that is characterised by instruments of public monitoring and scrutinizing of government power. In a monitory democracy, public institutions are established which subject government to public mechanisms of checks and balances. Within monitory democracies, public political participation is not exclusively achieved through representation; all fields of social and political life come to be publicly scrutinized. Monitory democracies are often characterised by a weakening of the central grip of elections, political parties and parliaments on the citizens. Independent monitors of power keep politicians, political parties and elected government on their toes. Monitoring democracies often have a range of mechanisms and institutions, outside of the state, often facilitated ones, that publicly scrutinise the conduct, activities and affairs of government. These may include a robust investigative media, anti-corruption organisations, a robust civil society, etc.

NOTE:

It is possible for a country to have a hybrid of all or some of the types of democracies noted above. Each type of democracy has its own pros and cons. Often, certain types of democracies are borne out of a need and take root with time. Central however in all of these types of democracies is that public representatives are elected by citizens and are thus given a mandate to do certain things within a limited period of time after which the citizens must reflect on the conduct and performance of those public representatives and decide if they want to elect them back into power or not. This is the centrality of the hiring and firing function in elections.



CHAPTER 2:

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Direct democracy, a form of government in which political decisions and law-making rests with the entire body of qualified citizens, is impractical in most modern societies. Democratic government is rather conducted through public representation where qualifying citizens elect and transfer governing power to a select group of public representatives. Elections are therefore an important mandate and power transferring moment in a democracy.

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FIVE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD VOTE

There are plenty of reasons people give for not exercising their right to vote. Yes, apathy is one of them but people also experience voter suppression, they are concerned of logistical factors such as long lines in polling stations when they must still make their way to work, the socio-economic context in our country is a reality. Voter registration challenges are also a reality while other people may have health and safety concerns with the Covid-19 pandemic raging across the country. This material is developed mindful of all of these very real concerns. None of these reasons should deter anyone from voting for the following reasons:

1. WE VOTE FOR OUR DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS

We all have dreams and aspirations and our government has a central role to play towards the realisation of those dreams. The government plays a central role in the improvement of the quality of our education, accessibility of healthcare, in job creation and investment attraction, in accessibility of land and housing, in our safety and in a whole host of other things that have to do with our personal dreams and aspirations.

In our vote lies the power to decide on the quality of life that we want for ourselves and for future generations. Voting is a moment to STAND UP. To stand up for the issues that one cares about, like access to and improvements in education, health care, public transportation, jobs, etc. Voting is a moment to decide what is best for you.

2. NOT VOTING IS A VOTE

Elections are decided by the people who go out and vote; their decision impacts your life whether you participate in the elections or not. If one feels unhappy about the outcomes of an election that they had chosen to boycott, they would have, by default, helped elect into power whoever would have won the election. So, no voting in an election is actually an election deciding factor. There is no such thing in a public election as no vote.

In a world where we have so little control of what our governments do, how could anyone not do the one thing that we, as citizens can do, vote. Even if you do not believe that your vote can improve your life, it can positively affect the lives of others.

3. IT IS PUBLIC MONEY, THEREFORE YOUR MONEY

Voting is so much more about the future than it is about the present. It is so much more about the big picture. Often, it is not even about the candidates that we love or dislike but it is about the kind of place where we want the country to be in future. Voting is less about hope and more about competence, vision, ethical standards and quality leadership. Voting is a key moment of putting the right hands on the till. It is a key moment to decide how public resources are spent and to fire those who squander public resources. Voting therefore, is one of the most important, if not the most important tool available to citizens for working towards the future they want.

4. IT IS A CIVIC DUTY

It is a privilege to live in a democracy. Not many countries are democracies where people actually take part in electing a government. There are many countries where civil rights and liberties are trampled on and South Africa is, thanks to our liberators, not one of these countries. There are civic duties that come with democratic civility and voting is one such duty. It is irresponsible to not exercise this right. The process of regular elections strengthens and protects a democracy. You have a civic duty to contribute to the strengthening of South Africa's democracy.

5. YOUR COMMUNITY COUNTS ON YOU

Our communities are made up of friends, loved ones, neighbours and children. Some may not know the importance of voting while others don't have the privilege to. In your vote lies the hopes and aspirations of those closest to you. If you are not going to do it for you, then do it for someone else. Your parents, a sibling, a friend, the environment, etc. Do it for the disenfranchised and marginalised, vote for empathy and justice, vote for democracy. There are ample reasons why you should vote.



CHAPTER 3:

OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Many often ask, 'so I voted, what now?' The civic duty of citizens in a democracy does not only end with the process of voting, but entails processes following a vote. The legal framework of South Africa envisages a role for citizens in strengthening accountability and oversight. Oversight refers to a process of overseeing something or that of having a watchful eye over something. Accountability on the other hand describes a relationship between government and citizens (including the business community) that are affected by the decisions government makes.

Oversight and accountability are central to good governance and to the strengthening of democracy. Checks and balances are established in ways that open a window for the public to see and comment on key and impactful decisions that government makes. Strong oversight and accountability reduces the risk of abuse of power and corruption and contributes to building trust in government. It is in the best interest of government to strengthen oversight and accountability but often, government does not. So, what can the public do, following an election to strengthen oversight and accountability.

1. ARM YOURSELF WITH INFORMATION

Information is key. First you need to understand the legal premise for your participation in governance (the process of governing). There are many laws including the Constitution that empower citizens to participate in governance, understand these laws. In understanding the legal premise for civic participation, this also entails understanding the limitations of that right to participate so that you do not overstep the boundary and run into all sorts of unintended risks.

Secondly, understand the facts of the matter that is of importance to you for which you seek to participate in oversight. Also, understand the mechanisms available to you to participate in the matter and explore the extent to which you are able to participate through those already established mechanisms. If these mechanisms for participation do not exist possibly create your own - as long as your activities are lawful and well thought out. The Promotion of Access to Information Act is a powerful piece of legislation in as far as it strengthens accountability. Through this legislation, members of the public are able to access information from government that should essentially be in the public domain but is often not. Understand these and other laws that empower you in your endeavours.

2. ORGANISE

There is strength in numbers. As far as you can, organise and mobilise others to engage in oversight and accountability with or join others in their efforts. Government does not have the time to engage with individuals, often it is best to engage as a collective and in an organised fashion. There are a number of issue-specific grassroots movements emerging in South Africa who are engaging government in creative and impactful ways and who are strengthening oversight and accountability. If you cannot be part of these movements, establish your own. There is also a whole body of material on grassroots organising that can be easily accessed online and in traditional forms. What is important is that you organise in ways that make sense for you and for the people in your circle.

3. SOURCE TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Finding others who are already walking the road you want to travel to hold your hand and to give you advice is key. There are numerous civic organisations that are involved in government oversight and accountability that you can draw from. Some of these organisations are using sophisticated tools to strengthen social accountability that you can benefit from and others may even have resources to support your activities including your organising and mobilizing. Find these organisations and ask them for support. More often than not, these entities are willing to work with grassroots organising bodies as this strengthens the broader cause.

4. ACT

Experience comes from doing.

Make submissions in municipal budgeting processes, make submissions in IDP and spatial planning processes, get involved in the development of by-laws, etc. Participate in legislative reform processes of provincial legislators and other public participation processes of Parliament. Be active and do things. By the time the five-year period is over and it is time for the next election you possibly will have a strong sense of how the public representatives in power have performed during that five-year period because you would have been actively engaging and observing. Yes, five years is a long time to wait when things are going wrong, but it is also a long enough time for things to be done well.



CONCLUSION

This material is designed to engage you on two specific questions, the 'why' of voting and the 'what then after' of voting. It is our hope that we convinced you of the importance of your vote and as such, that you will go out to vote.

#StandUp!
#OurVoteMatters!





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