

Voter education and older African first-time voters in South Africa's 1994 elections

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Abstract

In the run-up to the first non-racial democratic elections held in April 1994 voter education targeted all South Africans to promote free and fair elections. A particular challenge for the campaign launched by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) was to reach illiterate and rural citizens. A nationwide representative sample survey conducted shortly after the elections sought to evaluate the effectiveness of voter education. The dataset pertaining to African first-time voters (n = 1 208) was re-analysed for this paper to compare the subjective experience of voter education and voting behaviour among older (50+ years) and younger citizens. A risk analysis was applied to identify categories of older persons who were less likely than others to receive voter education messages and to go to the polls. The results indicated that the voter education campaign was successful in engaging older voters and that voting behaviour of older and younger voters was similar. Where differences occurred, they were mainly associated with rural location and also education factors but rarely with age. The finding that post-election euphoria among older first-time voters equalled or surpassed that of younger voters led to the conclusion that voting was experienced as a particularly fulfilling moment in the lives of older black South Africans.

26 April 1994 saw our senior citizens turn out en masse to vote in our first democratic election. They came in buses, on foot, some in wheelchairs, others aided by walking sticks. In their hundreds, they waited patiently in the hot sun for hours to make that precious 'X'. It is an inspiration to all our older citizens that the highest position in the land, that of State President, is now occupied by a 75-year old - Mr Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. (Senior News, 1994, 1(3))

For South Africa the first non-racial elections in April 1994 marked the end of an era and the birth of democracy. April 26, 1994 was a special day for older South Africans. This day was set aside for them to cast their vote in the first free elections, one day before the polling stations were opened to other voters. The majority of older South Africans were first-time voters. They had waited over 40 years for this moment when they would be enfranchised.

In the run-up to the April 1994 elections voter education was brought to all South Africans. Voting procedures in the April 1994 elections were very different from earlier ones and for this reason the Independent Electoral Commission's (IEC) voter education programme addressed the entire population

of South Africa. Special voter education programmes (e.g. *Lets vote!* undated) were launched to target first-time voters.¹ One of the greatest challenges of the national campaign was to bring voter education to older first-time voters in remote areas and to instruct voters who could not read or write in the mechanics of voting. It is estimated that approximately 30 % of all South Africans are illiterate. In many countries around the world, the older generations have received less education than the younger ones. South Africa is no exception. Large numbers of African elderly have never been to school. For historical reasons the African elderly are concentrated in rural and remote areas which are not connected to modern communication systems. There was a risk that older African first-time voters, 50 years and over, who number about 2,4 million would be overlooked in the voter education campaign. This paper attempts to discover whether older voters were at risk of not casting their vote due to age, disability, modest education or a lack of exposure to mass communication in the rural areas. It gives a descriptive account of how older black South Africans were involved in voter education in the run-up to the elections and their personal experience of going to the polls.

Shortly after the April 1994 elections a representative sample survey was conducted nationwide to assess the impact of voter education in preparing South Africans to cast their ballots on election day. A total of 2 219 respondents participated in the survey, of whom 1 208, or 54 % were African and by definition first-time voters. This data subset was re-analysed for this paper to compare the voting behaviour and experiences of younger and older African first-time voters.²

It is estimated that Africans 50 years and older would have spent their entire lives under apartheid rule. The youngest in this group would have been some four years of age when the Afrikaner nationalists came into power in 1948. Older black South Africans have had longer exposure to apartheid legislation which affected upward social mobility and life chances, mass removals to enforce separate living areas, and attempts to keep Africans from urbanizing. Given a lifetime of hardship and repression it might be expected that casting a vote would signify to older black South Africans that they had overcome this endurance test and that their wish to live in a society free of oppression had been granted. From this viewpoint one could expect that election day would be remembered as one of the happiest and most fulfilling days in the lives of older South Africans.

An alternative viewpoint is that younger voters spearheaded the campaign to overturn apartheid rule commencing with the student uprising of 1976 and continuing with the

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campaign to make the townships ungovernable. The youthful experience of the struggle against apartheid might have been shorter but more intense. From this viewpoint one might expect younger voters to be more eager than their older compatriots to grasp the opportunity to vote to seal their triumph over apartheid. In other words the youthful experience of voting would be even more euphoric than that of their elders.

The intermediate position is that the act of voting was an equally significant act for all South Africans regardless of age. Nonetheless, practicalities might differ by age. Prospective younger voters might have fewer difficulties in "making their mark for democracy" due to advantages of literacy and greater physical mobility. The question is whether the special considerations for older voters, such as the special voting day, and voter education would erase these differences.

The sample survey referred to earlier, which documented voting behaviour and experiences of all age groups, provided a unique opportunity to explore these ideas. The timing of the sample survey was perfect for the task at hand. The survey was conducted shortly after the April 1994 elections while impressions were still fresh in the minds of voters. Sample surveys, which by design produce only superficial responses, may not be the most appropriate method to probe deeper-seated attitudes and emotions. However, survey results can provide useful pointers in conjunction with other materials. Older South Africans were highly visible on the special election day and their behaviour was documented by photo-journalists (see Pogrand, 1994; Reynolds, 1994). It was therefore possible to compare survey response material with on-site observations to verify trends.

Aim

The study on which this analysis is based aimed to evaluate the impact of voter education on the outcome of the elections. A secondary aim was to collect evidence to assist in the assessment of free and fair elections. This paper focusses on the former aim and documents how older voters benefitted from voter education in exercising their democratic right to vote and made personal gains from that experience.

The key question which guided the survey design was whether the voter education campaign had been successful. The researchers reasoned that if voter education were successful it must reach potential voters in time for them to get their identity papers in order. Voter education would have to reach the entire population, especially persons living in remote areas and in so-called "no-go" areas which were controlled by one party. It must allay fears of intimidation and violence in the run-up to the elections and on election day (cf. Johnson, Schlemmer, Seymour & Marais, 1994; Schlemmer & Hirschfeld, 1994). Voter education messages would inform people of their democratic right to participate (or not to participate) in the forthcoming elections and would instruct potential voters in the mechanics of voting. Knowledge of the mechanics of voting should increase the confidence of first-time voters at the polls. From a more practical point of view it should streamline the election process by reducing the time needed to process inexperienced voters (cf. Primer on election: 1994).

In sum, successful voter education would take its messages to all first-time voters, provide comprehensive information on the principles and mechanics of voting, encourage people to use their vote by ensuring the safety of voters and emphasizing the positive outcome of the elections for the wellbeing of individuals and the country. Further, voter education communications would be comprehensible to the target population and attuned to their need to know about voting and

democracy. The most telling test of successful voter education would be a highly motivated electorate and a high voter turnout on the day. If voting was perceived as a personal gain, the voting experience should also be a gratifying experience for individual voters.

Lastly, in a democratic society citizens are free to support the party of their choice which best serves their interests. Voters are entitled to change party affiliation if their party does not perform well. It was assumed that persons who had benefitted from voter education would be more critical of their party's performance, less fearful of voicing their political opinion, and more supportive of democratic ideals.

Method

Sampling

Items which probed various aspects of voter education were included in a large omnibus survey whose sampling design featured nationwide coverage. The effective sample was weighted to ensure adequate representation of metropolitan, urban and rural populations, geographic area and social strata. Data collection, editing and compilation were carried out on behalf of the researchers by MarkData, the survey research facility attached to the Human Sciences Research Council. The fieldwork for the survey was conducted during the period 30 May to 17 July 1994.

The instrument

The survey instrument was developed in the month before the elections when levels of violence and intimidation were high in some regions. At this time there was still uncertainty whether the Inkatha Freedom Party lead by Mangosuthu Buthelezi and with a large following in KwaZulu-Natal would contest the elections. Given the volatile political climate, several questions were designed to probe reasons for non-participation in the elections and specific anxieties and fears which might have prevented South Africans from going to the polls.

Only selected questions from the survey instrument are discussed in this paper. The questions covered three periods: The run-up to the elections, election day, and the aftermath. Fixed-response items were used with a few exceptions where indicated.

Run-up period

A matrix item inquired how respondents learned about voting and from which sources. Persons who had been instructed by voter educators and political parties were asked to identify by name the organization to which educators were attached and the most active voter education organizations in the area (free-response items). Persons who had received voter education were also asked to specify the language and medium of instruction. Three items focussed on timing issues: At which stage in the run-up to the elections had the respondents been exposed to voter education; when had they made up their minds to participate in the elections; and when had they decided which party to vote for? A number of items inquired into personal and community networks which influenced voters: With whom were voting issues and party choice discussed? Did local community leaders urge members of their constituency to participate in the elections?

The elections

The respondents were asked whether they had voted in the elections or not. Non-voters were asked to indicate their reason for non-participation. Spontaneous responses were fitted to a given list of 13 categories covering fear and

intimidation, voter uncertainties and unpreparedness, practical disincentives, and personal convictions and reasons. The respondents were free to add to the list. Agree-disagree statements inquired into motivations to vote, and personal experience and assessment of the situation at the polling station. A further item inquired how voters identified the party of their choice on the ballot sheet.

Evaluation and post-election period

All respondents were asked to assess the usefulness of seven voter education messages: The secrecy of the ballot box; the double ballot system which allowed voters to split their party votes at the national and provincial levels; the right to vote for the party of one's choice; the right to vote or not; requisite identity documents; and what to do at the polling station. Four agree-disagree statements probed whether voter education had been communicated effectively and had promoted voter preparedness. Questions contained in a later section of the questionnaire presented a set of statements to test views on democratic ideals. The respondents scored up to six points if they endorsed the principles of a multiparty system, government open to popular influence and controlled by an elected parliament, an independent judiciary, and a free press. The democracy "test" was applied to assess whether persons exposed to voter education had internalized democratic ideals.

A set of items explored the role of the international observers in voter education and monitoring. One knowledge item and one opinion item are discussed in this paper.

A multi-item question tested the political climate of the country immediately after the elections. A series of items inquired whether voters felt disillusioned with politics, and fearful or constrained in their political choice. Responses to these items are reported here mainly because they contain clues to perceptions of intimidation and free choice during the election period. Finally, two items modelled on earlier surveys explored post-election happiness and life satisfaction.

Analysis

Initially the sample was divided in three age groups: < 25 years, 25-49 years, and 50+ years. Sample characteristics and voting behaviour were inspected in tables with this threefold division. The characteristics of the sample are reproduced in Table 1 in this format. It was observed that the variations in sample characteristics and behaviours generally tended to be greatest between the youngest and oldest groups when the threefold division was applied. However, behaviour differences were also manifest when the sample was divided in two age groups of persons younger than 50 years and persons 50 years and older. In the interest of saving space and keeping the focus on older voters, the survey results in Table 2 and the discussion refer to this twofold division.

Weighted sample distributions are reported throughout. To aid the interpretation of the data, tests of statistical differences were applied to the unweighted data for exploratory purposes only. As the weighted data tended to inflate such differences, tests to assess statistical differences between sample distributions were applied to the unweighted data. Measures based on chi-square were used in the case of nominal-level data and Spearman's rho in the case of ordinal-level data.

The report which follows is mainly a descriptive account of voting behaviour in the pre-election period and on election day, and the respondents' evaluation of their experience of voter education and voting. For ease of reference, the designations "respondent" and "voter" are used interchangeably in the discussion.

Table 1

Selected subsample characteristics: weighted percentages*

Characteristic	Age group		
	< 25 years	25-49 years	50+ years
Total	100	100	100
Gender			
Male	40	37	37
Female	60	63	63
Education level			
Standard 3 or lower	10	25	60
Standards 4 - 8	50	49	35
Standard 9 or higher	40	27	5
Employment status			
Pensioner	-	1	46
Housewife	4	7	13
Unemployed	7	7	8
Informal sector worker	2	2	0
Workseeker	28	30	9
Employed, self-employed	9	49	23
Student, scholar	50	4	-
Residential location			
Metropolitan area	43	39	29
Rural area	93	93	93
Other	7	7	7
New province			
Western Cape	3	3	1
Northern Cape	1	1	0
Eastern Cape	20	15	28
Free State	9	8	5
KwaZulu-Natal	27	21	17
Eastern Transvaal	6	8	8
Northern Transvaal	11	16	13
Gauteng	16	18	13
North West	8	11	15
Home language			
Northern/Southern Sotho	28	36	35
Xhosa	27	19	32
Zulu	33	30	23
Other	12	15	11
Religion			
Mainstream Christian denominations	48	51	43
Evangelical churches	25	22	24
African independent churches	17	19	21
Other	7	5	6
None	3	3	6
Standard of living items ("yes" responses)			
Television set	56	52	38
Electricity or running water in the home	41	44	32
Refrigerator	35	36	30
Music centre	50	47	36
Motor car	13	15	10
Telephone	10	11	11
Media participation ("yes" responses)			
Reads a daily newspaper regularly	43	36	16
Watches television on weekdays	71	62	45
Age group (years)			
50 - 54			22
55 - 59			21
60 - 64			16
65 - 69			19
70 - 74			14
75 - 79			5
80 - 84			3
85+			0
Unweighted N	285	677	246
Weighted subsample proportion	23	56	21

* Columns in some distributions do not add up to 100 % due to rounding.

Table 2

Access to voter education, voting behaviour and evaluation, by age, and risk factors:^a weighted percentages

	Age group (years)		Risk factors							
			Area		Education		Age		Multiple risk	
	< 50	50+	Urban	Rural	High	Low	Low	High	Low	High
Weighted subsample proportion	79	21	32	68	57	43	43	57	78	22
Sources of voter education										
Radio	79	75	74	75	76	73	75	75	75	74
Television	65	45***	69	33***	57	29***	47	43	51	23***
Radio or television	90	86*	96	81**	89	82*	87	85	88	78*
Radio, television or newspaper	91	87*	97	83**	91	83	90	86	90	78*
Media details:										
- Radio - English/Afrikaans	21	14*	25	10**	17	11	14	15	15	11
- Radio - African languages	77	73	72	73	74	72	73	73	73	73
- Television - English/Afrikaans	33	19***	33	13***	24	13*	20	18	22	9*
- Television - African languages	60	42***	68	30***	54	27***	45	40	49	20***
- Newspaper	40	25***	36	20**	34	13***	29	23	28	14*
Friends	66	53***	51	54	53	54	56	52	52	59
Family	64	58	59	58	59	57	48	66***	56	68(*)
Political party	55	50	51	50	56	43(*)	53	48	53	43
Voter education	51	40**	33	43	40	40	37	42	39	43
Church	29	24	28	22	28	18	24	24	26	17
Colleague(s) at work	30	17***	25	13*	19	14	25	11**	18	14
Trade union	8	4*	9	2*	3	5	4	4	4	4
Voter educator details										
African National Congress	59	57	53	59	58	55	55	55	56	60
Independent Electoral Commission	23	14***	16	13	15	12	10	16	13	15
Church organization	29	24	28	22	28	18	23	24	26	17
Trade union	8	4*	9	2*	3	5	4	4	4	4
Civic organization	3	0*	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	1*
Voter education medium										
Speeches	73	73	64	78*	74	72	74	73	73	73
Pamphlets	71	64*	54	68	67	59	60	66	64	61
Comics	40	31*	30	32	35	26	30	32	33	26
Films/videos	39	24***	45	15***	32	14***	26	23	28	11*
Role play	22	13***	17	11	15	11	20	8*	15	5*
Workshop	20	13**	14	12	13	13	17	10*	14	8
Theatre	16	10*	13	8	11	8	13	7	11	7
Language										
English/Afrikaans	17	7***	11	4*	5	8	7	7	7	6
African languages	83	93	89	96	95	92	93	93	93	94
Partisan voter information										
Told how to vote only	90	90	93	89	89	92	95	87(*)	92	84(*)
Told for whom to vote	10	10	7	11	11	8	5	13	8	16
Timing										
Received voter education in:										
- 1993	51	49	52	47	53	43	49	49	48	51
- January/February 1994	28	24	24	24	24	24	26	22	24	23
- March/April 1994	20	26	22	29	22	32	23	29	27	26
- No information	0	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	0
Decision to vote made by:										
- End of 1993	56	52*	57	50(*)	52	53	52	53	51	56
- January 1994	17	15	16	14	17	12	17	13	15	13
- February 1994	7	8	8	9	10	7	10	8	10	2
- March 1994	11	12	14	11	8	17	12	12	12	13
- April 1994	9	13	5	17	14	11	10	15	12	16
Party choice made by:										
- End of 1993	53	46**	55	42**	47	44	46	46	46	44
- January 1994	14	12	17	9	13	10	9	14	13	10
- February 1994	7	8	2	11	9	8	12	6	9	7
- March 1994	12	14	18	13	12	18	14	14	15	13
- April 1994	14	19	8	25	19	20	19	20	17	26
Voter support groups										
Discussed voting with:										
- Family, friends	62	60*	56	62	61	59	57	62*	60	61
- Other persons	16	10	12	10	10	10	14	8	11	9
- No one	22	30	32	29	29	31	29	30	30	30
Discussed party choice with:										
- Family, friends	30	30	29	31	28	33	23	36	28	40
- Other persons	5	2	4	1	3	0	2	2	2	-
- No one	65	68	66	69	69	67	75	63	70	60

	Age group (years)		Risk factors							
			Area		Education		Age		Multiple risk	
	< 50	50+	Urban	Rural	High	Low	Low	High	Low	High
Called to vote by										
Headman	8	13*	4	18*	13	13	17	10	13	14
Street committee, union, civics, self-defence units	13	12	12	12	9	9	9	15	12	14
No one	76	70	78	67	74	74	71	70	72	65
Other	3	4	6	3	4	4	3	5	3	7
Voted in April 1994 elections										
Yes	97	98	98	97	98	97	99	97	99	94
Motivations to vote										
To support my party	98	98	100	97	97	98	97	98	97	100
Proud to vote	97	96	98	95	97	95	97	95	97	93
My vote was secret	92	92	92	92	93	92	96	90(*)	92	91
To use this new opportunity	88	88	92	86	88	87	84	91	88	88
Knew how to vote	82	75**	79	73	81	66*	76	74	77	66
Sufficient monitors	89	89	96	86*	91	86	92	87	92	79**
No security problems	83	86	88	85	85	87	86	86	86	84
Queues – waited long to vote	76	81	81	81	80	81	76	85	79	86
Travelled far to vote	38	41	32	45	39	44	40	42	40	45
Made mark against										
Picture of leader	49	59**	50	64*	55	66	58	61	56	71*
Name of party	35	23	34	18	25	21	28	19	25	15
Party symbol (logo)	13	14	10	16	16	12	12	15	14	14
Party letters (acronym)	3	4	7	2	5	2	2	5	4	–
Evaluation of voter education										
Very useful information: ^b										
– Secret vote	96	97	95	98	97	98	98	97	98	96
– Right to vote for party of own choice	90	89	86	90	91	86	96	83**	92	78*
– Voting procedures	88	86	88	84	89	81	91	82(*)	87	74*
– Freedom to vote or not to vote	85	85	89	83	88	81	89	82	89	70*
– Documents required	84	78	76	79	79	77	79	77	79	74
– Double-ballot system	78	78	76	78	76	80	78	78	79	75
– Split-ballot vote	69	70	64	74	74	66(*)	75	67	71	67(*)
Overall assessment										
Needed this information to vote	87	84	88	82	82	87	81	86	83	87
Information clear and sufficient	80	76*	84	73	79	72(*)	77	75	79	67*
Information confused me	9	12	9	13	8	17*	8	14	9	20*
Wished to learn more	47	48	47	49	48	48	46	50	46	55
Endorsement of democracy principles										
Mean score (6 = highest) ^c	3,4	3,3	3,6	3,1**	3,4	3,1*	3,3	3,3	3,4	3,0*
International observers										
Knowledge of international presence:										
– Helped to make elections free and fair ^d	83	74***	78	72	76	73	75	74	76	70
– Made no difference ^d	12	20	18	20	20	18	19	20	19	21
Party affiliation										
ANC voter										
Future party affiliation:										
– Unconditional	74	82**	80	83	82	83	78	85	81	85
– If party keeps campaign promises	78	81	83	80	79	83	80	81	81	79
– Might vote for another party	26	18***	13	20	19	15	20	16	18	15
– Dangerous to talk about elections	23	22	21	23	21	24	17	25	22	23
– There will be no future elections	22	27	19	31**	23	32	25	29	26	33
Post-election subjective wellbeing										
Global happiness	86	85	77	88*	84	85	81	88	83	90
Satisfied with life-as-a-whole	80	80	72	83	77	83	80	79	79	84
Unweighted N	962	246	88	158	139	107	107	139	195	51

^a Risk factors: Resident in rural (versus urban) area; < Standard 1 education (versus higher educational attainment); 60+ years of age (versus < 60 years); all three risk factors present (versus < 3 risk factors).

^b Items paraphrased.

^c T-test applied to explore significant differences.

^d Adjusted for larger-than-average number of non-responses (12% among older, 6% among younger voters).

(*) **, *** Almost significant, significant at the 0,05, 0,01 and 0,001 levels. Calculated on unweighted data using chi square and Spearman's rho (see text). Columns in some distributions do not add to 100% due to rounding.

Results

Subsample characteristics

The sample was not drawn for the purpose of this analysis. Therefore it is instructive to compare the background characteristics of the different age groups before proceeding to the substantive survey responses. Table 1 presents the social profile of the older black voter and highlights the main differences between the social profiles of older, middle-aged and younger voters. For purposes of this exercise older voters are defined as 50 years and older, middle-aged voters as between 25 and 49 years, and younger voters as aged 18 to 24 years. The 50+ age cohort comprises just over a fifth of the weighted sample total. Gender distribution is approximately equal in all age groups. Older voters were more likely to be pensioners and to live in a rural area than their younger compatriots. Older voters were over-represented in the subsamples drawn in the Eastern Cape and North West regions, and slightly under-represented in KwaZulu-Natal. Because home languages vary according to region, larger proportions of older than younger respondents were Xhosa speakers. Zulu speakers were slightly under-represented in the older subsample. Compared to the youngest group of voters, a slightly higher percentage of older voters stated that they belonged to an African independent church or indicated no religious affiliation. Older voters enjoyed a lower standard of living as indicated by limited access to modern amenities in the home, electricity, telecommunications and the media. Table 1 highlights the contrast in the living standards of the youngest and oldest groups.

Voting behaviour

Table 2 gives an overview of the substantial survey responses. The following discussion refers only to the first two columns on the left-hand side of the table which compares the behaviour of voters under 50 years and voters 50 years and older. The results show that voter education reached potential voters mainly through the electronic media, and reached significantly higher proportions of younger than older voters. African language radio was the most important means of communication for all black voters and especially for older voters. The print media played a comparatively insignificant role in communicating voter education messages to the older voter. Apart from the media, friends, family, political parties and voter educators attached to a range of organizations assisted in bringing voter education to the electorate. Church organizations and colleagues at work played lesser roles in voter education. There was no evidence in the survey results that some denominations were more active than others in teaching their members about voting. Only small percentages of voters, mainly younger voters, indicated they had learnt about voting from their trade union. The respondents identified the African National Congress (ANC) as the most active voter education organization in their area.

Voter education messages were mainly conveyed through speeches and through pamphlet campaigns. These two communication channels reached voters of all ages. Older voters also learnt about voting through comics, film shows, role play, workshops and theatre. However, significantly fewer older than younger voters were involved in the latter voter education programmes.

The vast majority of black voters received voter education in an African language, presumably the language of their choice.³ Only approximately one in ten respondents indicated that voter education messages had been partisan.

The findings on the timing of voter education indicate that voter education tended to reach older voters later than other

voters although the timing difference was not statistically significant. Older voters tended to take their voting decisions later than their younger counterparts in the run-up to the elections.

In general, voters were most likely to discuss election issues with family and friends. However, party choice appeared to be a more private matter which voters were less prepared to discuss with others, even persons in their intimate circle.

The results suggest that the majority of voters of all ages went to the polls of their own accord. However, a higher percentage of older than younger voters were put under pressure by local leaders to exercise their vote. Leaders attached to urban and rural community structures influenced between a fifth and a quarter to exercise their right to vote. Tribal headmen appeared to play an important role in calling older folk to vote in the rural areas.

The experience of election day

For once, there was peace across the land. (Newsline)

Bomb scares, long queues and hiccups at the voting stations could not dampen the determination and enthusiasm of thousands of people ... to cast their historic vote for a better South Africa. (Brian King, *Sunday Tribune*, May 1, 1994)

South Africa, Wednesday, April 27, 1994. It can be remembered in many ways, with many emotions ... When the people began to form these lines they became a new people, spontaneously and unintentionally ... Black South Africans learned what whites already knew: how to vote. White South Africans learned what blacks knew: how to wait. They did it together, in marvellously straggly multi-coloured queues in areas where the polling was working, and in lines of astonishing forbearance and determination in areas where it was not ... The old South Africa's final revenge lay in the fact that predominantly black areas suffered most of the difficulties, but even this unbearable frustration was borne ... The intangible feeling of new South Africanness – it is difficult to capture it more closely – was reflected in a thousand different exchanges, vignettes, shards of conversation ... The aged of the country, caring so much about voting that they waited and even died in order to declare on the future for younger generations ... They grasped their precious votes, the repository of dignity, to their hearts and celebrated. (Shaun Johnson, *Daily News*, April 29, 1994. Emphasis added).

I do not mind the distance that I have to walk to vote. It is the distance to end all distances. (Northern Transvaal voter, cited in *New Ground*, 1994, 11:25)

I have waited all my life for this day. No long queue is going to stop me. (Elderly voter cited in *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, April 22-28, 1994)

I didn't think this would happen in my time. (72-year-old first-time voter who queued from 04:00 to cast his special vote at a polling station that did not open until late afternoon so he returned the next day, *Natal on Saturday*, April 30, 1994)

It is my life's fulfilment. (*Daily News*, April 27, 1994, citing the 90-year-old widow of Chief Albert Luthuli, South Africa's first Nobel Peace Prize winner) ... *The sparkle in her eyes was still there three days later ... our mother seems to be different since she voted – she lived to see the day when all South Africans went to the polls.*

(Interview with the eldest daughter who accompanied her mother to the polls in *Daily News*, April 30, 1994)

I feel happy because at least I had a chance to vote at this age. And I am proud to vote for Nelson Mandela. (75-year-old male voter interviewed in the *Sunday Tribune*, May 1, 1994)

The vast majority, 97% and 98% of younger and older respondents, voted in the April 1994 elections. Major motivations to participate in the elections concerned the need to support the party of one's choice, pride in participating in the first free elections in the country, confidence that the ballot was secret, and the need to use the opportunity to vote. Alternatively, the latter motivation might have been perceived as one's duty to exercise newly-won democratic rights. The above motivations were shared equally by voters of all ages. The majority of voters of all ages were confident that they knew the voting procedures. However, significantly fewer older than younger voters expressed this confidence.

The situation at the polling stations was assessed positively by the majority. Over four in five voters stated that there were sufficient monitors and no security problems at their polling station. Although differences were not significant, higher percentages of older than younger voters admitted that they had to overcome obstacles such as long distances and long waits, in order to cast their vote.⁴ Once in the polling booth, older voters tended to make more use of the pictures of their party leaders than younger voters in identifying the party of their choice.

There were no age differences regarding the perceived usefulness of voter education messages. Messages concerning democratic principles such as the secrecy of the vote and voters' rights were considered equally important to learning the mechanics of voting. Although not significant, a slightly higher proportion of younger than older voters required information on how to obtain identity documents which qualified them to vote. Double ballot issues were considered less important or useful to voters in the April 1994 elections than other messages. This result might have arisen due to the timing of voter education. Voter education was well under way in many areas when the final decision was taken to introduce the double ballot system. The double ballot might not have featured in the curriculum of some voter education programmes.

In general, voters evaluated voting instructions positively. The vast majority of first-time voters agreed that voter education had been essential for them: "Without that information I would not have been able to vote correctly." However, older voters were more likely to admit that the information was not always clear and had confused them. Just under one in two voters wished to learn more after receiving their first instructions. The democracy scores achieved by voters suggested that knowledge about democratic principles could be improved among first-time voters of all ages.

Older voters were less well informed about the presence of international observers during the election period and those who indicated awareness were less likely to believe that the international presence had made a difference for the outcome of the elections.

Most first-time voters gave their votes to the ANC. Majorities indicated that they would continue to vote for the same party, especially if it kept its campaign promises. Older voters were more likely than younger voters to think that they would remain loyal to their party. Minorities among older and younger voters were pessimistic about the future, or believed there would be no future elections. Slightly less than a quarter

of first-time voters stated it was dangerous to talk about elections.

The vast majority expressed happiness and satisfaction during the weeks after the elections.

Older voters at risk

Table 1 confirms that the major divisions in the older subsample of voters 50 years and older refer to residential location, education and age. Given that rural dwellers and the illiterate dominate the older subsample, it is difficult to establish whether trends in the voting behaviour of younger and older voters result from location and education factors, or advanced age and disability. A second thrust of the analysis attempted to disentangle the confounding effects of location, education and chronological age by comparing the voting behaviour of three subsets of older voters characterized by residence in urban versus rural areas (urban areas included peri-urban shack settlements), literacy versus illiteracy (indicated by educational level attainment below Standard 1), and age below 60 years versus 60 years and older. The fourth subset divided the older subsample in two groups which featured all versus only one or two of the above "risk" characteristics. The multiple-risk group comprised illiterate persons over 60 years who lived in rural areas. For purposes of the analysis it was assumed that voters of this description would be at greater risk than others of not receiving voter education and, as a consequence, of staying away from the polls or submitting a spoilt vote.

The eight columns on the right-hand side of Table 2 compare results for different groups of "fifty-plus" first-time voters. The variables break the subsample of voters by location, education, age and a combined risk factor. The category presumed at the outset to represent a risk factor which might prevent older voters from accessing and benefitting from voter education and performing well on election day is placed to the right in each of the four sets of variables.

The results generally confirm that voter education through the media and special programmes were less likely to reach the rural, less educated and older-old than other categories of older voters. Exceptional in reaching these difficult-to-target older groups of voters were ANC voter education activities, and the pamphlet and comic book campaigns designed to penetrate "no-go" and remote rural areas, and to reach illiterate target populations. Noteworthy is that rural voters were more likely to be addressed in African languages which would improve communication of voter education messages.

The location factor

The results consistently highlight the fact that it is mainly location which rendered the media less accessible to older voters. Education appears to have played a lesser role with the exception of the print media which is not accessible to the illiterate.

Voting behaviour also appears to vary more by location than other risk factors. Rural voters were more likely to delay the decision to vote and to be less optimistic about future elections being held. Local headmen played an important role in calling rural voters to the polls. Rural voters also perceived greater obstacles in reaching the polls on election day and casting their vote. Rural and less educated older voters were less well informed about principles of democracy and the presence of international observers during the election period. However, the results suggest that the location factor might have played a more important role than education. Whilst rural older voters tended to have greater difficulties than their urban counterparts in accessing voter education and the polls,

the experience of post-election euphoria was more widespread among the former.

The education factor

Difficulties in comprehending voter education messages appeared to stem largely from education and not from age factors. Illiterate voters were less likely to perceive voter education messages to be clear and useful. Significantly higher percentages of less educated voters expressed a lack of confidence at the polls.

The age factor

Age factors appeared to be important in only four instances. Older-old voters were less likely than others to be included in voter education programmes using role play and workshoping methods. They were more likely than others to look to family for advice on voting issues than other agents. Lastly, the older-old were somewhat more skeptical than other older voters about the usefulness of some voter education messages and the secrecy of the ballot box. Although numbers were very small, older-old voters were more likely than others to state that they were told "which party to vote for" as well as "how to vote."

The multiple-risk factor

The analysis suggested that one risk factor alone might not be sufficient to jeopardize the positive effects of voter education. It was only when all three risk factors – location, education and age – were present that voter turnout was negatively affected. However, given the very small numbers involved, generalizations from this finding must be viewed with caution.

Discussion

The study showed that voter education programmes targeted more younger than older voters. Nevertheless, voter education did reach the vast majority of the population, over 90%, through the media. However, media audiences differed by age, the contrast being greatest between voters under 25 years and voters 50 years and older. African language radio was the most important means of communication, especially for older voters, the majority of whom live in rural areas without electricity and do not read daily newspapers. Older voters were also less likely to be involved in voter education programmes than the middle or youngest age group. The oldest-old were excluded from role play and workshop programmes. Comics tended to have more general appeal among all age groups: 44% of the under-25-year olds and 31% of the 50+-year olds who received voter education stated they had learnt about voting from comics.

Although the media and the ANC played prominent roles in disseminating voter education messages to the public, the results of further analysis not shown here suggested that special voter education programmes run by the Independent Electoral Commission, political parties other than the ANC, civic organizations, churches and trade unions may have contacted very small percentages of potential voters who might otherwise not have been reached by the media (Hanf & Møller, 1995). Although older voters were less likely to gain access to voter education programmes generally, the results in Table 2 suggest that the efforts of the ANC and the churches were equally inclusive of younger and older voters.

The finding that voters of all ages discussed general voting issues but not their party choice in the family circle might reflect political tension in the run-up to the elections. Alternatively, this behaviour pattern might be interpreted as evidence that voter education lessons had been learnt well. The

secret vote was one of the most important and difficult messages to communicate to voters especially in violence-torn communities. Most voter educators advised their pupils that they need not disclose their voting intentions to others. One manual instructed people to lie if necessary to guard their secret and to avoid intimidation.

The results of the second analysis indicate that rural location and illiteracy constituted a greater disadvantage than age to potential voters who wished to learn from voter education and exercise their right to vote. Location proved to be the factor which accounted for most variations in the voting behaviour of younger and older voters. The results suggest that education and not age accounted for the perceived lesser competence of older voters at the polls. The older-old voters indicated that they were less appreciative than others of information on voting procedures. Nevertheless, the older-old appeared to have learned their voter education lessons as well as younger persons had. There are no signs in the data to suggest that older-old voters were less confident than others when casting their vote. In contrast to younger voters, not a single older or even older-old voter reported that illness had prevented them from going to the polls. More older persons, especially rural voters, were determined to cast their vote regardless of obstacles in their way. Older rural voters, in particular, were well served by the ballot sheets which offered a pictorial option for identifying the party of their choice. Even if the older-old voters did receive more partisan voter education messages than others, they were certainly perceptible enough to report it in their survey response.⁵

To **sum up**, voter education could be seen to be effective in that it reached very high proportions of the electorate. The acid test of effective voter education, namely a high voter turnout, could not really be measured. The violence which had been expected to accompany voting in some regions did not materialize. The remarkable calm during the election period rather than prior assurances that the polling stations would be well-monitored, probably accounted for the unexpectedly high turnout on election day. The vast majority of the population went to the polls, and were confident that they knew voting procedures well and that their vote would be kept secret. Even non-voters may have learned their voter education lessons well. Non-voters did not stay away because they were ill-prepared or fearful but because of personal reasons and a conviction that it was their right not to vote. The voter education campaign to reach older voters might have been more difficult to organize. Nevertheless, the findings of this survey suggest that it was no less successful than among younger populations. In contrast to younger voters, older voters did not stay away for reasons of illness or because their identity documents were not in order.

Election euphoria

The findings on post-election happiness and life satisfaction can only be appreciated with reference to historical trends. For as long as happiness and life satisfaction indicators have been measured in South Africa, majorities of black South Africans have indicated dissatisfaction and unhappiness (Møller, 1994). The multidimensional study of South Africans aged 60+ years undertaken in 1991 (Ferreira, Møller, Prinsloo & Gillis, 1992) indicated 39% "satisfied" and 45% "happy" among the black elderly, compared to 90% among the white elderly. The first free elections may have marked a turning point. After the elections satisfaction and happiness levels of all South Africans were approximately equal. Not surprisingly, election euphoria was expressed mainly in feelings of joy.⁶

It is possible that risk factors amplified the happiness and satisfaction experienced after voting. A remarkable finding emerged from the risk analysis reported in this paper. Older groups of voters presumed to be at risk of not participating, due to factors such as residence in remote areas, illiteracy and old age, expressed higher levels of happiness and satisfaction. Election euphoria was significantly higher among the rural than the urban elderly. One interpretation is that post-election happiness and contentment were commensurate with effort. Older voters, particularly the rural-based older voters, had to overcome innumerable obstacles to cast their vote. They had to travel longer distances to their polling stations which were less adequately monitored, and had to wait longer in line to vote. It appears their joy was complete.

Conclusion

This paper attempted two tasks: (1) To assess whether the voter education campaign in the run-up to the April 1994 elections was successful in engaging the older first-time voter; and (2) to test the argument that the act of voting would signify liberation from oppression and a new lease of life especially for older South Africans who had waited longer and borne the brunt of apartheid all their adult lives.

The results showed that older voters, in spite of experiencing slightly more difficulties in accessing voter education, comprehending its messages and accessing the polling stations, behaved in essentially the same manner as younger voters. They turned out on voting day and made their mark with pride and with few exceptions with confidence.

The argument made at the outset of the paper, that older voters who participated in the elections gained more than their younger counterparts, is partially supported in the survey results. This survey shows that mainly older voters who made their mark in spite of the odds of remote location, illiteracy and advanced age experienced profound happiness and satisfaction after voting.

Beyond these two tasks the study also found that the behaviour of first-time voters of all ages was similar. In the few instances that older voters behaved differently from their younger counterparts, location and education were more likely to be significant factors than age. Voter turnout appeared to be depressed only when all three risk factors considered in this analysis were taken into account.

We have learned that age factors present less of a problem for planning voter education campaigns than other risk factors such as rural location and illiteracy. There are signs in the data that older voters, particularly the rural-based and the less educated, were eager to learn more than was offered in the crash course presented to first-time voters before the April 1994 elections. In the aftermath of the elections most older voters were confident that the electorate would participate in further rounds of elections. These results together with the massive literacy campaign planned for the country as a whole augur well for informed older voters in future elections.

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Notes

1. Africans were excluded from earlier all-white elections and the tricameral elections of 1983 in which Indian and coloured South Africans could vote. It is a known fact that substantial numbers of Indian and coloured voters boycotted the 1983 non-universal elections. Therefore, technically speaking it is also possible that Indian and coloured South Africans were first-time voters. However, the approximately 15 million Africans made up by far the largest group of first-time voters.
2. The IEC argued that the April 27, 1994 elections were very different from former ones and all South Africans, even persons who had voted before, required voter information. The white non-response rate on most voter education items in the sample survey reported here was approximately 20%, suggesting voter education was perceived to be an irrelevant issue by a substantial proportion of white voters. This survey outcome prompted the decision to focus this paper on the voting behaviour and experience of first-time African voters.
3. An attempt was made to match home language and the language in which voter education was communicated. The results indicated that the vast majority received voter education in their home language. A further small percentage received voter education in a language which was not their mother tongue but presumably the language of their choice. The latter conclusion was drawn on the basis of the observation that African voters who received voter education in a language other than their mother tongue, mainly English or Afrikaans, had attained above-average levels of education.
4. The special voting day did not take effect in some areas of the country. Some polling stations in the former homelands were not ready for operation on April 26, so older voters could not cast their special votes. To make up for the late start, the voting period was extended by one day.
5. In the total sample, reports of partisan voter education were associated with higher education which led to the initial conclusion that the more sophisticated voter might have been more perceptive in assessing communications. However, further analysis suggested that the link between higher education and partisan voter education was probably spurious in that receipt of partisan messages was also associated with National Party and Inkatha Freedom Party membership. The correlation between higher education and partisan voter education did not hold in the African subsample. A higher percentage of older-old voters stated they were IFP supporters who reported more often than others that they were told whom to vote for.
6. The vast majority of the South African population expressed happiness and satisfaction in the post-election period regardless of party affiliation. However, not surprisingly, euphoria was greatest among ANC voters who won the majority of the seats in the national parliament. Although numbers were small (99 in the total sample), it may be telling that non-voters were least likely to express satisfaction and happiness. This trend was also evident in the African and the younger African (50 years) subsamples. Twenty-four Africans under 50 years of age but only five aged 50 years and older did not vote. The younger African non-voters were significantly less likely than others to express satisfaction.

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