

What messages encourage political participation among young South Africans?

Widespread political participation is a foundational component of a vibrant democracy and an important mechanism for voters to exercise oversight of government. Encouraging people to vote is therefore a pressing policy concern. This study undertakes a randomized evaluation of the impact of providing young, unregistered urban South Africans with different types of motivational messages encouraging them to register and vote.

Policy Issue

In South Africa, voter turnout declined from 86 percent of the voting-age population in 1994 to 54 percent in 2014. Some of this decline is driven by youth (under age 30) who participate at systematically low rates. In 1999, 77% of youth were registered to vote, dropping to 65% in 2009, and 59% in 2014, while older cohorts register at rates between 85 and 95% (Schulz-Herzenberg 2014). Youth are also less likely to vote when registered: only 58 percent of registered 20-29 year olds voted in 2009, while between 80 and 90% of older registered voters did so (Scott et al 2011). This divergence is also growing: in a nationally representative 2013 survey, youth aged 16-19 and 20-24 were much less likely to report intending to vote in the 2014 elections than were youth of the same age in 2008 (Roberts et al 2014).

The “born-free” generation does not seem to participate in the very formal political processes their predecessors fought to achieve. If young people don’t register and vote, political parties are less likely to emphasise the concerns of the youth in policymaking, and government is less likely to be held accountable for policy failures. Indeed, the more general decline in political participation in South Africa has coincided with a decline in governance and a decrease in political accountability. Lack of formal participation by young people may also result in increased alternative forms of participation, like protests, civil disobedience, and even violence, which may further undermine democracy.

Conventional approaches to increasing voter participation tend to provide procedural knowledge about when, where, and how to vote. Yet such knowledge is not lacking. South Africa has free media, widespread access to information about parties, and widespread knowledge about where and how to register and vote—especially among young people. Indeed, young South Africans typically know more than older cohorts about how to register and vote, and they trust the electoral process more as well (Roberts et al 2014). However, higher proportions of youth than adults think their vote makes no difference, lower proportions think it is their civic duty to vote, and youth are generally less interested in politics (Roberts et al 2014). This study aims to address this issue by determining whether, and which kinds of, motivational messaging are most effective to get people to register to vote.

Context of the Evaluation

South Africans under 30 are the focus of the study, with urban Gauteng, which had the lowest rates of youth voter registration in 2014 (46 percent of 18-29-year olds registered compared to 56 percent nationally (Schulz-Herzenberg 2014)), as the geographic focus.

The study examined self-reported intention to register and to vote. We are also in the process of measuring participants’ actual registration status. While most studies consider only how best to generate turnout among registered citizens, in South Africa, establishing how to encourage registration is also key.

Details of the Intervention

In July, August, and September 2015, researchers conducted a “lab-in-the-field” experiment to assess the effectiveness of seven motivational messages in stimulating the intention to register and the intention to vote. These messages were crafted from theories of political participation, and the phrases used by focus group participants. They ranged from appealing to young people’s civic duty, to invoking the history of the right to vote in South Africa, to emphasizing that voting can generate political change.

The study surveyed 3,190 mostly black South African citizens aged 18 to 29 from Gauteng universities and technical colleges, and from multiple sites in Soweto. All participants were eligible but not registered to vote.

Once recruited and consented into the study, participants completed a brief pre-survey with an enumerator to gather demographic information, as well as information about whether they intended to register and vote in the forthcoming 2016 election. Subjects were then randomly assigned to receive one of seven different messages or a control, in which they received no message. The messages were delivered face-to-face, in English, by our enumerators. Subjects then answered a short post-survey about their intention to register and to vote, their prospective vote choice, and their interactions with government. All subjects received compensation (between R10 and R20) for their participation.

Initial Results and Policy Lessons (further results forthcoming)

Initial study results show that short, face-to-face motivational campaigns can successfully change young people’s self-reported intentions to register to vote and to vote. The key findings for policy-makers and implementers are as follows:

1. In general, motivational messages improve intention to register and vote in young South Africans, even if those messages contain limited information. Those who received a 30-second message from a young enumerator are 6.2 percentage points more likely to report intending to register and 6.3 percentage points more likely to report intending to vote than other young people recruited to the study who did not receive any message. This suggests that face-to-face campaigns where NGOs or Chapter 9 institutions get young people to encourage other young people to vote might be a promising method to improve voter turnout before the upcoming municipal election.
2. In South Africa, messages that emphasise youth-centric motivations to vote, such as the obligation to vote as a young person or substantive issues such as youth unemployment may out-perform messages emphasising the country’s history or more general messages that focus on a “duty to vote.” As illustrated in figure 1, the former raise the intention to register by between 7 and 8 percentage points. Messages highlighting the social pressure to vote and the external efficacy of voting (“every vote counts”) can also increase the intention to register and vote by similar amounts.
3. Critically, the effectiveness of different motivational messages depends on a person’s initial party preferences. We measured party affiliation before each respondent received a message. Among ANC supporters, messages emphasising youth unemployment and social pressure can increase the reported intention to register and vote by between 4.9 and 5.9 percentage points. For non-supporters of the ANC, messages can increase intention to register and vote by between 6.5 and 13 percentage points (Figure 3). Policymakers and implementers should think carefully about, and ultimately pre-test, their messaging so as to ensure they do not encourage certain types of people to participate more than others, as this would transform their ostensibly non-partisan interventions into partisan mobilisations.

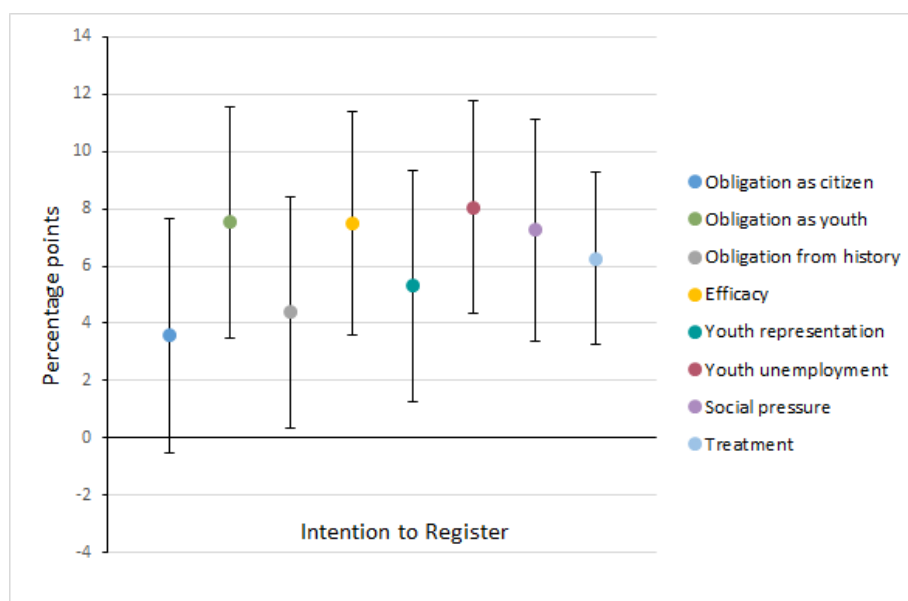


Figure 1: Message effects on intention to register in the 2016 municipal elections

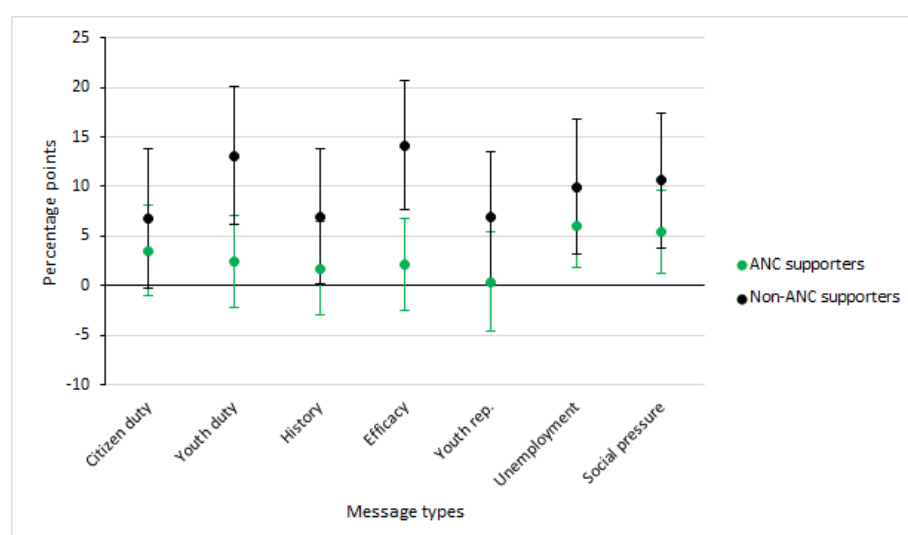


Figure 2: Effect of message types on intention to register for the 2016 municipal elections: ANC supporters and Non-ANC supporters

Message type	Description of message
Citizen duty	One has an obligation to vote to be a responsible citizen
Youth duty	One has a special obligation to vote as a young person, because young South Africans are less likely to vote
History	One has an obligation to vote stemming from history, specifically that after decades of struggle, the majority of South Africans only recently obtained the right to vote
Efficacy	One should vote because every vote counts (drawing on theory on political efficacy)
Youth representation	One should vote because most MPs are over 50 and young people are underrepresented in government (an appeal to people's desire to be descriptively represented)
Unemployment	One should vote because by doing so, young people drive politicians to pay more attention to issues which affect young people in particular, such as the jobs crisis (an appeal to people's desire to be represented on substantive issues)
Social pressure	One should vote because not voting will let down those who participate (friends, neighbours) and they will know if one doesn't vote (using social pressure to encourage political participation)