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To vote, or not to vote?

AS WE enter the run-up to South Africa's third democratic election, there are widespread fears that the level of electoral participation will be lower than in 1994 and 1999. How much would this matter? And what would be the longer term implications?

There is widespread agreement that high levels of electoral participation are a sound indicator of a healthy democracy. If people want to vote it implies that they accord the political system legitimacy. In other words, overall they accept the system as just and that they want to identify with it. It also implies that they think voting has meaning — that is, that it may influence their well being. Correspondingly, if levels of electoral participation are low the electorate is emitting warning signals that all is not well with a democracy as it is established.

Britain and the USA serve as illustrations of this point. In Britain, 70 to 80 percent of the registered electorate voted in early elections after the end of the Second World War in 1945. This reflected not only a high degree of national consensus about the welfare state and post-war reconstruction, but a high level of competition between two strong political parties.

In contrast, electoral participation sank to 58 percent at the last election in 1999 which saw a repeat landslide for Tony Blair's Labour Party. Declining participation in British elections in recent years reflects growing disillusion with the established political system, not least because of the abysmal failure of the Labour Party to provide a realistic alternative government to the Conservatives in the 1980s and the equal failure of the latter to compete with Blair's New Labour in the 1990s.

In the US the Democratic Party is presently in the midst of colourful battles to find a viable candidate to oppose George Bush in the forthcoming US presidential election in November.

Yet despite the razzmatazz of American electioneering, voter participation in US elections is traditionally distastefully low, with rarely much more than 50 percent of the registered electorate voting in presidential elections. Meanwhile, the Republican Party in particular makes concerted efforts — at least in some states (as in Florida in 2000) — to keep blacks and poor Americans off the electoral registration lists to actually prevent them from voting.

Voter turnout in the US is strongly associated with socio-economic status, so voter choice reflects the preferences of those Americans who are better off. Indeed, given the simply enormous amounts of money needed by candidates to contest US elections, the US is more an elective oligarchy of the rich than a genuine democracy.

These comparisons should make us reflect carefully about the importance of electoral participation in South Africa. On the one hand, a lower turnout would mirror the experience of other countries in Africa where lower turnouts in successive post-liberation or post-independence elections indicate lower levels of excitement and enthusiasm about the arrival of democracy. This need not be unduly alarming so long as voter turnout does not collapse to current British or established American levels.

On the other hand, the real worry is that a decline in electoral participation may indicate the declining legitimacy of our democracy. There is much talk of white people not voting because they are alienated and feel marginalised.

As in Britain, if they feel that the opposition is weak and does not constitute an alternative government, they may not bother to vote.

But more alarming are fears that poor people will stay away from the polls because their expectations of democracy have not been realised. Evidence suggests that the poor view democracy as strongly linked to "delivery" — better houses, education, health provision and access to water and electricity and so on.

Meanwhile, organisations like the Landless People's Movement are mobilising active dissent by promoting a boycott of the elections in order to strengthen their demands for the more rapid redistribution of land. Opposition critics warn against the dangers of ANC dominance, of South Africa becoming a de facto one party state.

Yet far more worrying is the prospect of Americanisation where electoral participation is skewed heavily in favour of the employed, the expanding middle class and the propertied rich. Stability and social justice both require that South Africa becomes more than an elective oligarchy.

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