

Article

Voter abstention in South African 2014 elections: beyond the apathy argument

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Abstract

This paper explores the attitudes of non-voters in South African 2014 national elections, their reasons for not voting and their views on politics more broadly. It uses data from 60 interviews conducted in ten research sites on election day. We challenge the three components of the apathy argument in explaining voter abstention: that non-voters are apathetic and indifferent, that apathy is about their personal disinterest in politics and lack of political engagement, and that in this apathy they differ from voters. Respondents showed a range of political views, and a range of reasons for not voting (from failure to register on time, residence at a different province, to not seeing a party that would reflect one's views and interests or a conscious boycott of the elections). Overall, they were similar to voters in their answer to the question 'Who would you vote for if you did vote?' in choosing three top parties: ANC, DA and EFF, with emotional and expressive reasons for their choice dominating over rational ones. At the same time, respondents expressed deep dissatisfaction with elections as a way to influence politics – some did not see alternatives to the ANC rule, even though they would be willing to support a smaller party, and others did not think that they could make themselves heard through elections, choosing instead other forms of political engagement.