

How not to increase voter turn out

 By [Abey Mbkqwatsane](#)

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Are you voting in the upcoming local government election? If the 2005 HSRC survey is anything to go by, 60% of you will be exercising your civil duty on 1 March. This figure is a decent margin higher compared to the last two local elections that were 48% and 49% for 2000 and 1995/6 respectively.



While I am not a political scientist, my gut feel tells me that the 60% turn out figure could be higher and in a worst case scenario, is overstated. My sense is that the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) could have generated more interest in the elections if it had invested more money in face-to-face discussions with communities about the importance of voting as opposed to a massive above-the-line (ATL) campaign - particularly in the more disadvantaged communities where people face the daily reality of the lack of service delivery.

The IEC has spent vast amounts of money in trying to solve a persuasion problem (you have to vote to better your life) using awareness mediums (TV, radio, print and outdoor).

The main issue facing millions of South Africans every day is the lack of basic service delivery. And I don't mean traffic lights being out in the main road near your place of residence or even the pot holes in your street. I'm talking about the chronic lack of basic education, housing, security and jobs; a perceived failure of the government to deliver on the promises they made to the masses that voted them into power.

AC Niensens's ADEX reported that in 2004 the IEC spent R34 064 877 on (ATL) advertising and an additional R40 675 431 between January and November in 2005. These figures are at rate card so the IEC could have effectively spent less thanks to discounts they may have received from media owners. The fact remains, however, that this is a substantial amount of money.

On the face of it, it seems that they did the right thing - create a great campaign and inform the populace about the election. However on deeper inspection it is clear that in order to persuade people to vote, generating awareness about the election is just half the job. An equally important task is making it clear as to why they should do so.

No amount of TV, radio, print or outdoor advertising will persuade communities that face the daily horror of lack of service delivery, to vote in a system they feel is not working for them. Voter apathy is a different kind of animal.

What the IEC should have done is invested in major face-to-face community interactions where trained facilitators spent time with the people on the ground, listening to their grievances and convincing them that the best way to effect positive

change is to vote.

This sentiment is supported by the same HSRC study that reported that "When asked what might encourage voters to put their cross on the ballot, about a third indicated that they would be encouraged to vote if they felt that their vote would make a difference."

Just more than a quarter (27%) agreed to the statement: "I will not vote because of a lack of delivery services". When this statement was analysed by age, it was found that more people in the youngest age group (18 to 24 years) agreed most with the statement. It's interesting to note that the "Power of X" campaign was targeted at younger people who the IEC wanted to encourage to vote. It's the same young people who most vehemently agree that lack of service delivery is what discourages them to vote. Where was this research when the IEC signed off the campaign?

While ATL has great value to add, its inappropriate use is often the result of lazy marketing and clients who are more often than not, only too happy to oblige. Let me be clear, I am not saying that its use is wrong in all cases, only that its wholesale utilisation needs revision.

You cannot solve a persuasion problem with an awareness medium - no matter how much money you throw at it. Hope to see you the polls on 1 March.

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