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MORE PARTIES, BETTER DEMOCRACY?

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The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) recently announced that 48 parties will contest the national elections on 8 May. That is more than the 29 that took part in 2014 - a 65% increase! Will greater participation, however, give South Africa a better democracy?

The astonishing fact is that according to the IEC's website, there are 312 parties registered at national level, and 294 at provincial level. The number of parties at national level shrank to 48 due to two factors. The first is the IEC's own selection process, which led to 118 parties being de-registered and 29 applications being rejected. The second factor is that some parties (117) did not pay the registration fee needed to participate in the election. These costs are quite high - R200 000 to participate at national level, and then R45 000 per province. A party that wishes to participate at national level and in all the provinces will therefore have to pay R605 000. A smaller party could find it challenging to raise such a sum.

The fact is that voters in the upcoming elections will have a far wider choice of parties than ever before in South Africa's democratic dispensation. It is, in fact, so wide that some voters are likely to be confused. The ballot paper will probably consist of more than three pages. Many voters would never have heard of the majority of the parties. What average voter would have heard of the "African Security Congress", "Compatriots of South Africa", the "International Revelation Congress" or "Woman Forward"? The smaller parties also do not get the same media exposure as the larger parties. And then there are two votes to be cast: one national and one provincial. How does one make those choices?

Most voters will hopefully know who they want to vote for before entering the polling station. The minority will make a decision at the last minute, perhaps based on the name of a party or a word in a party name that sounds appealing.

An argument often heard from the larger parties is that voters "waste" their vote by voting for a smaller party. The answer to this is a large "No" and a small "Yes".

In the proportional representation electoral system that South Africa has had since 1994, each vote has an impact. A party's representation in the national Parliament and Provincial Legislatures is determined by the number of votes it has - and each of those votes therefore "counts". In the 2014 election, the APC (African People's Convention) gained a parliamentary seat with 30 676 votes, while the next party (Al-Jama-Ah), with 25 976 votes, did not get a seat. If 5 000 more people had voted for Al-Jama-Ah, they would have had one seat and the APC would not be in Parliament. Those votes did not go to waste. A second part of the "No" deals with the fact that in our current political system, even small parties are playing a key role in coalition politics. They are sometimes called "king-makers" in local government and can often positively influence the senior partner in coalitions. A vote for a smaller party is therefore not a wasted vote.



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The “yes” to the question above can be explained as follows. If one looks at the upcoming elections, there are 35.9 million South Africans who are eligible to vote. Of these, 26.7 million registered as voters, and will therefore be allowed to vote. In 2009, the voter turnout percentage was 77.3% and in 2014 it was lower, at 73%. If one therefore follows the downward trend and works on a 70% turnout for 2019, 18.7 million South Africans will vote. Based on IEC formulas, a party will require approximately 45 000 votes to get a seat in Parliament. If the turnout is only 60%, this number decreases to 40 000 votes. In 2014, 29 parties contested the election and the majority of them (16) did not receive enough votes to get a single seat. One could, therefore, argue that the votes for those smaller parties were indeed “wasted”. On the other hand, the number of these “wasted” votes comprised such a small number of the total votes (178 060, so less than 1%) that none of the bigger parties like the ANC, DA or EFF could have benefitted. However, it was somewhat more than the number of votes that the seventh largest party, the FF+ (with 165 715 votes), managed to obtain.

What voters who are still deciding who to vote for must remember, is that if one plans to vote for a smaller party, one needs to be sure that the party will be able to get at least 45 000 votes nationwide. A vote will therefore help put a smaller party in Parliament. Here the track record of a party is important. If a party was unable to get more than 30 000 votes in the last three elections, it is doubtful whether said party will manage to do so in 2019. Therefore, evaluate the smaller parties very carefully ...

Can more political parties in the election therefore improve our democracy?

The reason for so many more new parties is primarily dissatisfaction with the current situation in the country and the governing party’s role therein. There are also new parties driven by personalities who collided with their previous parties and then broke away - Patricia de Lille’s GOOD being a prime example. In other cases, new parties are local groups or groups with a one-dimensional agenda, such as the environment or women’s rights. Whatever the reasons, more parties must be welcomed and can deepen our democracy. If the smaller parties (excluding the ANC, the DA and EFF) can collectively get more votes than, for example, the 8.3% they received in the 2014 election and get 15%, they will lessen support for the larger parties, and in that way, keep them on their toes.

Ultimately, 48 political parties participating in a national election are endlessly better than some developing countries with a one-party democracy, where one can only vote for or against one presidential candidate. The 2019 election is therefore another step forward in improving and deepening South Africa’s relatively young constitutional democracy.

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