

# **Popular Attitudes Towards the South African Electoral System**

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Report to the Electoral Task Team

*By Roger Southall and Robert Mattes*



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## Preface

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The Democracy and Governance programme of the Human Sciences Research Council publishes an Occasional Paper series which is designed to offer timely contributions to debates, disseminate research findings and otherwise engage with the broader research community. Authors invite comments and responses from readers.

## About the Authors

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## Executive Summary

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At its simplest, any formal review of the type of electoral system as in South Africa has three broad options. First of all, it could conclude that things should be left as they are. Second, it could conclude that radical reforms are necessary and call for a shift to a fundamentally different system based purely on constituency representation. Or third, it could call for moderate reforms to address the weaknesses of a purely proportional representation system by infusing it with elements of constituency representation while guaranteeing overall proportionality of legislative seats to votes.

To what extent can the views of ordinary South Africans inform such a choice? Even to the most optimistic public opinion researcher, the task of measuring citizens' preferences on this issue is daunting. True, those South Africans who have voted in both national and local government elections now have at least some exposure to different kinds of electoral systems, to which middle-aged and older white citizens add the memories of a purely constituent-based system. But the degree to which people have internalised what happens once they cast their vote, or its implications for the behaviour of elected officials and party leaders, is certainly open to question.

Thus, in order to provide the Electoral Task Team (ETT) with the most useful information on public attitudes, this survey of public opinion focuses first on measuring public views of the system they have in front of them, and second, on assessing what they want out of a voting system in general. To the three broad choices outlined above, the responses reveal the following conclusions:

- There would be little public support for a radical shift toward a ‘first-past-the-post’, single member constituency system. This is good news for the ETT since the Constitution requires that any system result ‘in general, in proportional representation’. In fact, South Africans appreciate the achievements of the current system in maximising many values that a ‘first-past-the-post’ system would have difficulty providing, such as proportionality, but also maximum inclusiveness and fairness. There is minimal preference for the type of candidate-centred, United States-style weak party system that a ‘first-past-the-post’ system can encourage. Indeed, for the most part, people are happy with the present system.
- If South Africans are generally satisfied with what they have, does this mean that the ETT should say simply ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’? We feel the evidence provided by the survey answers in the negative. First of all, public satisfaction with the current system is neither consensual nor widespread. Significantly higher proportions are dissatisfied than one would prefer, given that a voting system is an integral part of the overall constitutional framework. Second, while South Africans appreciate that the existing system produces proportionality, inclusiveness and fairness, they also emphasise other values that a pure list-based version of proportional representation has difficulty producing: values such as independently-minded legislators accountable to local grassroots public opinion.
- Finally, far from saying ‘it ain’t broke’, other survey results suggest strongly that the system *is* broke in at least one very important way. While Parliament has tried to address the lack of a direct connection between the people and the legislature by assigning putative constituencies to Members of Parliament (MPs), very few South Africans contact their MPs, and evidence from other surveys demonstrates that few people can even hazard a guess about who their MP is. Perhaps most damning, this survey shows that just one in five South Africans think

that national and provincial legislators listen to the opinions of ordinary citizens or look out for their interests. Left unchecked, such views threaten to turn into a cancer in the body politic that slowly eats away at public confidence in democratic institutions.

The introduction of a constituency system would not, in itself, resolve all the issues giving rise to voters' perceptions that South Africa's politicians are not adequately responsive to their needs. However, the introduction of some form of constituency system would provide for a direct link between voters and their representatives, thereby enhancing the sense of obligation of the latter to the former. This survey seems to suggest that voters would favour the introduction of a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system, featuring the introduction of multi-member constituencies. Such a reformed system would maintain overall representivity (as well as other favoured electoral values), whilst simultaneously enhancing prospects for accountability.





## **Popular Attitudes Towards the South African Electoral System**

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### **Report to the Electoral Task Team**

The Electoral Task Team (ETT), chaired by Dr Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert, was established by Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Minister of Home Affairs, in May 2002. Its purpose was to review the current electoral system and recommend any reforms in time for the next general election. Any such reforms have to be implemented in terms of Section 4 (1) of the 1996 Constitution (Act No. 108 of 1996), which states that the National Assembly shall consist of no fewer than 350 and no more than 400 members elected through an electoral system that:

- is prescribed by national legislation;
- is based on the national common voters' roll;
- provides for a minimum voting age of 18 years; and
- results, in general, in proportional representation (PR).

Section 4 (2) adds that an Act of Parliament must provide a formula for determining the number of members of the National Assembly. Similar provisions – Sections 105 (1) and (2) – apply to the composition and election of the provincial legislatures.

To inform their thinking, the ETT commissioned a nationally representative survey of public attitudes about the qualities of the current electoral system, and how it might be improved

within the constraints of the Constitution. It was conducted by four prominent South African research survey companies (ACNielsen, MarkData, Markinor, and Research Surveys) and coordinated and analysed by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC).

### **Framework and methodology of the survey**

The specific objectives of the survey were to obtain information from amongst the pool of potentially qualified voters concerning levels of political awareness and participation, knowledge of the political system, sources of information on politics and government, previous and potential voting behavior, attitudes toward the current electoral system and preferred values to be achieved by an electoral system. A recommended questionnaire was designed for the ETT by the HSRC, containing both structured and semi-structured questions. The ETT made final decisions about which question items were included in the final version.<sup>1</sup>

The questionnaire was administered face to face to a random, nationally representative sample of 2 760 South African citizens of voting age, between the period 16 July and 16 August 2002. This included 60 pilot interviews to test the length of the interview and the formulation of the questions.

The HSRC designed the sample of the target population, with the sampling population defined as all people living in households and hostels (but excluding special institutions such as prisons and hospitals) who could be contacted and interviewed. A list of all Enumerator Areas (EAs) based on the 1996 census was used as a sampling frame. The list contained descriptive data on the number of people and number of households for each EA in the country.

The final sample was a random, disproportionate, multi-stage, stratified, cluster sample. The list of EAs was stratified into nine provincial lists, and then into four population groups within each province, and further into rural and urban lists. To obtain the required sample of 2760 individuals, 690 EAs were

randomly selected from these lists with the probability of selection proportionate to population size. Finally, an implicit stratification by home language was introduced through a method known as 'controlled selection'.

Within each of the selected EAs, four visiting points were randomly selected. At each visiting point, all eligible respondents were enumerated and one respondent was randomly selected. No substitutions were allowed. If the selected respondent was not at home at the time of the first visit (normally made after working hours), two follow-up visits were made at agreed times and dates. Questionnaires were administered in the language of the interviewees' choice, with appropriate use of show cards. Interviewers reported that the questionnaire was formulated clearly and was user-friendly.

This resulted in a sample that was representative because it was random and because each South African had an equal and known chance of being interviewed. However, some exceptions were necessary to enhance the reliability of the analysis. In the Northern Cape and amongst the three minority population groups (white, coloured and Indian respondents), strictly proportional selection would have resulted in insufficient numbers of respondents selected to support detailed analysis. Thus, a disproportionate number of EAs was selected among these strata. These cases, however, were subsequently weighted downward so that they would have the proper influence on the final national results.

### **Attitudes toward the current electoral system**

South Africa's first two democratic, non-racial general elections (including elections for the nine provincial assemblies), held in 1994 and 1999, were conducted under a national list system of PR, with no minimum fixed proportion of the total number of votes or threshold required for parties to gain representation in Parliament or provincial assemblies. The choice of this electoral system was an outcome of the negotiation process that produced the democratic settlement, and was dictated by

the perceived characteristics of this form of PR. Notably, it had the virtues of, first, being simple to use and to explain to voters. Second, it provided for maximum representation thereby ensuring the inclusion rather than the exclusion of minority parties and opinions. Third, because it was inclusive, it was more likely than alternative electoral systems to encourage reconciliation and co-operation between the competing political parties (a quality that was enhanced in the first Parliament by a constitutional requirement requiring a government of national unity consisting of all parties winning a minimum number of seats). Overall, the idea of proportionality was seen as vital to allay suspicions that the electoral system would unfairly favour one party over another (as can notoriously happen via the manipulation of the demarcation of constituency boundaries under the plurality systems used in South Africa prior to 1994, or still in use in the US, UK and most Commonwealth countries).<sup>2</sup>

If the mechanics of the national list PR system were intended to provide a system that was 'fair', then the political assumption on which that intention was based was that elections held under its rubric would also be 'free'. In the post-negotiation South African context, this required that parties would encounter 'a level playing field' in the sense that no party would be favoured above others by the governmental or administrative machinery. To this end the 1994 and 1999 elections were run by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), established under the 1994 Constitution and charged with administering elections in a politically neutral way.

**Fairness and equality** Given these imperatives driving the selection of the present electoral system, we begin by reporting results to a set of question items that gauge public opinion about these very aspects of the current system. Because people may have very different levels of knowledge about the existing system, the interviewer began this set of questions by informing respondents that:

General elections are normally held every five years. In these elections, people vote for a political party. The top people from each party's list of candidates then go into Parliament or the provincial assembly according to how many votes each party receives. Once Parliament is elected, the Members of Parliament elect the President and the members of provincial legislatures elect the Premiers.

The survey then asked respondents a series of questions about their opinions of the current electoral system. Looking across these questions, it is clear that a substantial majority feels that, overall, the present system is fair and treats parties and voters equally.<sup>3</sup> Three-quarters say they are 'satisfied' with 'the way we elect our government' (74 per cent) and agree the system is 'fair to all parties' (72 per cent). Approximately two-thirds feel that 'all voters were treated equally' in the 1999 election (68 per cent) and that 'all parties were treated equally' in 1999 (63 per cent). Thus, the voters agree with scholars who focus on PR's ability to represent broad swathes of plural societies.<sup>4</sup>

*Table 1. The fairness and equality of the present electoral system*

	Yes	Neutral/ don't know	No
Are you satisfied with the way we elect our government in South Africa?	74	5	21
Is the voting system fair to all parties?	72	11	17
Do you think that all voters were treated equally in the 1999 general election?	68	14	18
Do you think all parties were treated equally in the 1999 general election?	63	16	21

Before we proceed further, we need to step back and think about the criteria we use to evaluate these and subsequent responses. The typical analysis of public opinion looks carefully at issues of the balance of opinion, that is, at which options are supported by a plurality or even a majority of

respondents. However, readers need to consider whether normal majority/plurality/minority considerations are adequate criteria to judge these results. Should support for the fundamentals of the constitutional system (such as national identity, democracy, the Constitution itself, and the way we elect our representatives) enjoy a scope of legitimacy broader than a simple majority? Do electoral systems require what political scientist David Easton once called 'diffuse support', meaning a type of support for government that is almost consensual and cuts across all societal cleavages?<sup>5</sup>

With these considerations in mind, these results taken together suggest that the system is far from 'broke' in the eyes of voters. Accordingly, caution ought to be exercised in 'mending it'. However, against that, we note that fully one-fifth of respondents are dissatisfied with the present system, and that around one-third are either dissatisfied or non-committal in their judgement. In other words, support for the current system is less than consensual and significantly-sized minorities are dissatisfied.

**Accountability** There is a similar pattern of responses to a series of questions on the breadth of representation and degree of political accountability produced by the present system (Table 2).<sup>6</sup> Four-fifths of respondents feel that the system 'ensures that we include many voices in Parliament' (81 per cent) and that the system gives voters a chance to 'change the party in power' (78 per cent). Around seven in ten say the system enables voters to 'influence Parliament' (71 per cent), that it produces 'the best possible government' (69 per cent), and that it allows voters to hold political parties 'accountable for their actions' (68 per cent). However, we see a notable drop off in agreement when we ask whether the system helps voters 'hold individual representatives of government accountable for their actions': here, just 60 per cent agree and fully one-quarter (25 per cent) disagree.

All of this suggests that voters recognise that the system produces a high level of representativeness and also believe

Table 2: *The electoral system and political accountability*

	Yes	Neutral/ don't know	No
Does the voting system ensure that we include many voices in Parliament?	81	8	11
Does the voting system give voters a way to change the party in power?	78	9	14
Can voters influence Parliament?	71	11	18
Does the voting system give us the best possible government?	69	9	22
Does the voting system help voters hold the parties accountable for their actions?	68	12	20
Does the voting system help voters hold individual representatives of government accountable for their actions?	60	15	25

that it allows them to turn the party in power out of office, if necessary. In other words, while several commentators have categorised the African National Congress (ANC), which won 63 per cent and 67 per cent of the national vote in 1994 and 1999 respectively, as a 'dominant' party,<sup>7</sup> voters do not necessarily view its position as unassailable. In other words, most voters believe that the electoral system enables them to make their voices heard in the halls of Parliament and ensures that political parties 'anticipate' their reactions at the next election to the actions they take today.<sup>8</sup>

However, these results also suggest that many voters agree with those political scientists who argue that PR's weakest area is that it does not allow the electorate to hold individual parliamentarians and government officials accountable.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly notable in the context of the task that the ETT has been given. It must take into account the widespread argument that the national list PR system weakens the political accountability of individual members of legislatures by empowering party leaderships (who exert considerable

influence in the construction of the parties' lists of candidates for election). In contrast, constituency or geographic representation provides a more direct link between voters and their representatives, whilst simultaneously demanding of the latter a dual loyalty (to both their party and their constituents). We will address this question at greater length below. On the whole, however, the results in Tables 1 and 2 display a relatively high level of satisfaction with the existing system.

**Explaining popular evaluations of the electoral system** In order to test which factors structure attitudes towards the current electoral system, the survey measured a range of basic demographic characteristics (eg. age, race, home language, education, household type, employment, province and rural-urban status). It also measured a series of attitudinal and behavioural factors such as respondents' main source of political information, their political knowledge, political interest, and their political participation in previous elections and other forms of political activity.

Statistical analysis revealed that, as in so many other areas of public opinion in South Africa, the most important *demographic* structuring characteristic is race. For instance, if we revisit the issue of satisfaction with the present electoral system, we find that white, coloured and Indian respondents are considerably less satisfied than black voters with various aspects of the current system. At the same time, readers should note that the overlap is far from complete.<sup>10</sup> Between one-third and one-half of white voters, and just above one-half to 60 per cent of coloured and Indian respondents, offer positive assessments of the current system. It is also notable that between 12 and 15 per cent of black respondents register dissatisfaction with the system. Clearly, many other factors besides race shape the way voters think about the political world.

What may be most significant for the ETT is the fact that there is greatest cross-racial agreement with the items that refer to the electoral system per se (i.e. 'the way we elect our government', 'the voting system is fair') than with the items



that refer more to election administration ('treatment' of parties and voters). Thus, although the overall objectives of the present electoral system would seem to earn relative approval across all racial groups, the mode of its implementation appears to be in considerably greater dispute. Again, however, we refer readers to the issue of how much support is required for something such as an electoral system, and how widespread that support should be.

*Table 3: Fairness and equality of the present electoral system (by race)*

	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>
Satisfied with way we elect our Government.	81	51	56	64
Voting system is fair.	78	48	55	68
Voters were treated equally in 1999 general elections.	75	37	55	57
Parties were treated equally in 1999 general elections.	70	34	46	52

*Percentage agree*

There are smaller racial differences in attitudes toward the degree of political accountability produced by the current system.<sup>11</sup> There is broad cross-racial agreement that the system allows people to influence Parliament and produces as broadly representative a Parliament as possible. However, whites in particular are considerably less optimistic than other voters that the system enables people to hold individual representatives and political parties accountable or that it produces the best government possible. Readers should note that the fairly widespread misgivings of the minority voters that the electoral system renders parties and individual politicians unaccountable is also shared by over a fifth of blacks. As will be illustrated in Table 4, these queries about accountability are

echoed in people’s thinking about the relative values of alternative electoral systems.

*Table 4: Political accountability of the electoral system (by race)*

	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>
The voting system ensures we include many voices in Parliament.	83	70	77	82
The voting system offers a way to change the party in power.	81	53	73	80
The voting system gives us the best possible government.	77	37	55	59
The voting system holds parties accountable.	73	43	61	66
Voters can influence parliament.	72	64	70	85
The voting system holds representatives of government accountable.	64	38	57	64

*Percentage agree*

We use regression analysis to examine the factors that shape how people view the electoral system, testing all relevant *demographic*, *attitudinal*, and *behavioural* factors measured in the survey.<sup>12</sup>

Tables 5 and 6 display the most important standardised regression coefficients (all results are displayed in Appendices A and B). These coefficients take into account that the different factors are measured with different scales and summarise the relative impact of each factor on views of the electoral system. We see that race still plays a very strong role. Even when we statistically control for the impact of differences in rural-urban status and educational status, white, coloured and Indian respondents are still considerably more negative in their assessments of the equality and fairness of the system than are blacks. Controlling for other factors, whites are significantly less positive about the political accountability of the

system than all other voters. Moreover, these differences remain even when we control for differences in respondents' approval ratings of elected officials. This strongly suggests that racial differences in evaluations of the electoral system are not simply a function of their disapproval of the party in government, the ANC. With regard to the other important demographic determinants, more educated respondents are more likely to say that the system produces fair and equal results, and those who live in formal housing are less likely to say that it produces accountability. Other demographic factors such as rural-urban distinctions and gender had no impact.

At the same time, readers should note that job approval ratings of elected officials themselves have a major impact on how people see the electoral system (they are the second strongest determinant after race of popular views of the system's equality and fairness, and have the single strongest impact on assessments of its accountability). In other words, controlling for all other factors, the more people approve of the way their elected leaders do their jobs, the more positive they are about the electoral system. Since we know from other research that job approval ratings are heavily shaped by partisan factors, we interpret this to mean that views of the electoral system are also strongly shaped by partisan criteria (independently of the impact of race). To support this interpretation, we also point to the fact that those respondents who identify with a political party are much more positive about both aspects of the current electoral system than other voters. Based on the results of virtually all other research on this matter, we know that the large majority of these identifiers support the governing party, the ANC.<sup>13</sup> Since the impact of partisanship remains even after we have statistically controlled for the impact of race, this means that the 57 per cent of black respondents who identified with a party (predominantly the ANC) are far more likely to approve of the existing system than the 43 per cent who are politically 'independent'. That South Africans view the current electoral system through a thick partisan lens is something that the ETT needs to take seriously.

Finally, those respondents who are interested in politics have more positive assessments of both aspects of the current system than those who are not. Interaction with the political system (in the sense of making contact with elected officials, and party or community leaders) leads to more positive assessments of the system's freeness and fairness, and those who have voted most often since 1994 are more likely to feel that the system produces accountability.

*Table 5: Determinants of evaluations of the equality and fairness of the system*

	<b>Standardized coefficients (Beta)</b>
<b>Demographics</b>	
White	-.42**
Coloured	-.15***
Indian	-.09***
Education	.05*
<b>Political attitudes</b>	
Approves of overall performance of elected leaders	.27***
Interested in politics	.08***
Identifies with a political party	.06**
<b>Political behaviors</b>	
Voting participation since 1994	.09***
Makes contact with leaders	.05*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.38

*Dependent variable: index of perceived equality and fairness of current electoral system.*

*Table displays all variables with a Beta weight equal or greater than .05.*

*\*\* In this and subsequent tables, one asterisk indicates significance at the level of .05, two asterisks at the level of .01 and three asterisks at the level of .001.*

Table 6: Determinants of evaluations of the accountability of the electoral system

	Standardized coefficients (Beta)
<b>Political attitudes</b>	
Approves of overall job performance of elected officials	.27***
Identifies with a political party	.11***
Interested in politics	.09***
<b>Demographic factors</b>	
White	-.25***
Lives in area with formal housing	-.07**
<b>Political behaviours</b>	
Voting participation since 1994	.08***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.28

Dependent variable: index of perceived accountability of current electoral system. Table displays all variables with a Beta weight of .05.

### What do South Africans want out of an electoral system?

The broadly positive popular views of the current voting system mean that there is little pressure for a radical move to a fundamentally different type of system. But can we conclude that the voters see no need for *any* reform? Recall that we have already seen that political support for the existing system is far from consensual. Significant pockets of negative and pessimistic opinions exist, located disproportionately (though clearly not wholly) amongst racial minorities. But negative opinion is also concentrated amongst the sizable proportions of black respondents who are dissatisfied with the performance of elected officials, who do not identify with a political party, and who are less engaged with the political process (cognitively or behaviourally).

Moreover, when we ask voters about the sorts of things that they want a voting system to produce, large proportions and

even majorities emphasise features that South Africa's model of pure proportional representation has great difficulty producing. These things, in order of preference, are a direct connection between local areas and legislators, greater grassroots control over legislators, a directly elected President, greater freedom for legislators to criticise their own political parties and take their own stances on legislation independently of the party line, and the potential for independent candidates. At the same time, when posed the choice, most respondents want a Parliament that is as broadly representative as possible, even at the risk of slowing the legislative process. They also want parties to nominate more women, and indeed favour requiring them to do so. This section will review these results in detail.

The ETT and the survey designers were conscious from the start that levels of public knowledge about competing electoral systems were likely to be scant at best. Thus, the survey took an alternative route and attempted to get at the kinds of broad values that people felt should be maximised in an ideal voting system. Two types of questions were used to get at these preferences. First of all, respondents were asked an open-ended question to tap what voting meant to them. Second, respondents were given a range of paired statements intended to get them to express preferences on prominent dimensions of electoral choice often identified by analysts of electoral systems.

**The meaning of voting** We turn first to the question of what voting means to South Africans. The responses reveal at least three important lessons (see Table 7). First of all, South Africans exhibit a high degree of literacy on the subject. Just six per cent are unable to articulate any meaning to voting. This echoes the high turnout rates in the first two democratic general elections.<sup>14</sup> It could reflect at least two different factors. First, the goal of 'one man, one vote' was the overarching theme of the entire liberation movement. Second, international donors, local and international Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and the South African IEC have poured large amounts of

resources and efforts into voter education since 1993. The evidence seems to support the second option. In testimony to the broad-based reach of voter education, educated respondents are no more likely to offer some understanding of voting than less educated respondents.<sup>15</sup> The most important demographic difference appears to be age: older voters are significantly more likely to say they 'don't know' when asked what voting means.<sup>16</sup>

Second, there is little sign of cynicism about the act of voting. Just four per cent gave comments that could be described as indifferent or negative views toward voting. Most of these people told interviewers that voting made no difference. But the important point is that this opinion is held at the moment by an extremely small percentage of eligible voters. Thus, whatever the differences among South Africans about the efficacy of the present electoral system, there is widespread agreement that the act of voting – universally acknowledged as perhaps the key characteristic of democracy – is important.

Third, voters infuse voting with a variety of meanings, many of which can apparently be held simultaneously. Three specific cognitions of voting were mentioned most frequently. It is important to remember that respondents were allowed to offer more than one response. Their responses were written down verbatim and coded into broader categories after the fact. The most frequently mentioned meaning was to see voting in procedural terms, as a way to select representatives and government officials or leaders (mentioned by 42 per cent of all respondents). Mentioned just as frequently, and often by the same people who offered a procedural understanding, 42 per cent of all respondents attribute a substantive or instrumental purpose to voting (that is, they see it as a tool for securing material improvement in living conditions), many of whom paraphrase the ANC campaign slogan and say that voting brings 'a better life'. Third, one-quarter (26 per cent of all respondents) say voting has an important symbolic purpose: that is, to vote is an act of participating in a democracy and an expression of citizenship and responsibility to society.<sup>17</sup> Finally, some 10 per

Table 7: The meaning of voting

	Percent	
<b>Voting is about electing representatives</b>		42
Voting is about electing persons, leaders, the President.	16	
Voting is about electing someone who will consider our needs and rights.	13	
Voting is about choosing the right person or party.	8	
Voting is about electing a government.	5	
<b>Voting allows transmission of needs and demands</b>		41
Voting is about getting the things we want or need.	6	
Voting is about getting help to obtain pensions, electricity, water and housing.	9	
Voting is about getting help to get employment.	8	
Voting is about securing a better life.	13	
Voting is about transformation and improving life in the community.	5	
<b>Voting symbolizes citizenship</b>		26
To vote is to vote for our country.	1	
Voting is about being involved in society, being involved in South Africa; it is about taking part.	2	
Voting is about making a difference, contributing to society.	2	
Voting is about being heard.	8	
Voting is about getting equality / equal treatment for everybody.	3	
Voting is about exercising our democratic rights, fighting for our needs.	9	
Voting is about being recognised as a citizen.	1	
<b>Voting allows identification with charisma</b>		10
Voting enables you to choose a person or party you admire.	10	
<b>Other</b>	4	5
<b>Voting does not make a difference</b>		4
It makes no difference if you vote or not, voting is a waste of time.	3	
Other indifference comments.	1	
<b>Don't know</b>	6	6

*Can you describe what it means to you to vote?*



cent see voting as an act of identification with a party or person they admire, a figure which is surprisingly low given that 52 per cent of respondents claimed that they felt close to a political party. This may suggest that South Africans' partisan identification is potentially more fluid than is often assumed.

With a few exceptions, responses show few important variations according to race. White (37 per cent), coloured (40 per cent) and Indian respondents (37 per cent) are more likely to see democracy in symbolic terms than are black respondents (21 per cent). Coloured respondents are far less likely to see democracy in procedural terms (22 per cent) than all others. White respondents are far less likely to see democracy in substantive terms (14 per cent) than all others.

While the overwhelming majority of South Africans attach major significance to voting and signal their intent to participate in the next general election, this does not necessarily mean that they all want the same outcomes from an electoral system. In order to tap the things people want a voting system to do, we offered respondents a range of paired statements. As mentioned previously, the goal was to get people to express preferences on prominent dimensions of electoral system choice that have been identified by analysts of electoral systems. We can group responses to these questions into four major dimensions. First of all, a set of questions measured people's positions on the relative importance of *individual candidates versus political parties*. Second, a set of items examined where South Africans stand on the issue of *localised versus centralised control of political parties*. Third, a set of questions assessed where respondents place themselves on the issue of *individual autonomy versus internal party discipline*. A fourth set of questions measured people's preferences on the issue of *representation versus legislative efficiency*. Finally, one question item asked people about their preferences for *direct election of the President*. We will detail the precise way in which each of these issues or dimensions is connected to the choice of electoral systems.

**Individual candidates versus political parties** Different voting systems can present very different ‘packages’ of choices to voters at election time. These range from, on one extreme, only political parties and their competing policy platforms (for example, South Africa), to a mixture of party platforms as well as individual candidates (Germany), to a more candidate-centred system in which party policies play some role (the United States), to the other extreme consisting purely of independent candidates where party affiliation is totally removed (Uganda’s no-party system as well as non-partisan elections in several American states).

While the space limitations of the survey did not allow us to tap every aspect of these dimensions, the questions that were asked allow us to assess broadly what type of outcome South Africans want their electoral system to produce. The evidence suggests that people want a system that revolves around political parties, though many voters want a system that has a space for independent candidates. More than two-thirds (70 per cent) say they prefer to vote for a party candidate rather than an individual. At the same time, four in ten (42 per cent) say they would like to see independent candidates elected to Parliament in 2004, and one-third (35 per cent) say they would personally consider voting for one.

*Table 8: Individual candidates versus political parties*

	Yes	Don't know	No
In the next election would you like to see independent candidates, that is, candidates who do not belong to any political party, elected to Parliament?	42	12	46
Would you consider voting for a candidate who does not belong to any specific political party, that is, an independent candidate, at the next election?	35	10	56
Do you prefer to vote for an individual, or do you prefer to vote for a political party?	28	2	70

Indian respondents are slightly more likely to support the inclusion of independent candidates. White voters are particularly likely to prefer voting for an individual personality rather than a political party. While black respondents are the most enthusiastic adherents of political parties, as many as a quarter would be prepared to vote for an individual over a party. But other than these, there is little difference between voters of different racial groups.

*Table 9: Individual candidates versus political parties (by race)*

	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>
Want to see independent candidates elected to parliament.	41	45	39	52
Would consider voting for an independent candidate at the next election.	33	42	37	47
Prefers to vote for an individual (rather than a political party).	26	40	26	37

*Percentage agree*

### **Localised versus centralised control of political parties**

Different combinations of voting systems and other constitutional arrangements may produce very different environments for political parties. For instance, a strong separation of powers between the American President and Congress mixed with a 'first-past-the-post' constituency system works to limit executive control over legislators of the same political party. Moreover, the mixture of strong federalism and state control of election machinery works to weaken severely national party control over state and local parties in the United States. Party candidates are chosen in primary elections by members of that party. South Africa may lie at the other end of this continuum. Here the combination of a parliamentary system, very weak federalism, and pure proportional

representation (plus the ability of party leaders to expel their own legislators from Parliament) produces very high degrees of centralised control. Candidate lists are generated by party branches, but central party committees exercise a strong degree of control over its final composition. Somewhere in the middle, various combinations of electoral rules and political institutions may produce legislators who must support the executive or risk bringing down the government, but have the strength to challenge party leadership in party caucuses. Other combinations of rules enable greater decentralised autonomy by allowing for governments to continue even when they lose legislative votes so long as no other party or parties can command greater support.

What type of outcome would South Africans like their electoral system to produce? The evidence suggests that people want a system that enables them to select their legislators and legislative candidates more directly, and have more direct access to legislators so they can better represent their interests and opinions.

First of all, close to three-quarters (71 per cent) said they want to vote for a candidate from the area in which they live; one-quarter said they did not (27 per cent). A follow-up, open-ended question then asked people, ‘Why do you feel this way?’ Again, people could offer up to three reasons. Interviewers recorded their verbatim responses, which were grouped in categories for analysis after the fact. The most frequently cited answers had to do with the belief that local candidates would better *represent* people’s opinions and interests; 43 per cent of respondents offered this type of response (see Table 11 for specific types of comments). The second most frequently cited set of replies (23 per cent) were

*Table 10: Localized versus centralized control of political parties*

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Don’t know</b>	<b>No</b>
Do you want to vote for a candidate from the area where you live?	71	1	27

Table 11: Reasons why people want or don't want local candidates

	<b>Percent</b>	
<b>Prefer local candidates</b>		
<b>Better representation</b>		42
Person will know what we want / will understand our needs / is familiar.	34	
Person will represent us in parliament.	6	
Other familiarity comments.	2	
<b>Proximity / familiarity</b>		23
Person will be close enough to contact.	15	
We know / trust / are familiar with them.	7	
Help your own people / people you know.	1	
<b>Better constituency service</b>		22
Person will satisfy our needs / help us / look after us.	14	
Person will help us with water, roads, employment, housing etc.	8	
<b>Other</b>		5
Prefer someone from my own area.	5	
<b>Prefers outside candidates</b>		18
No one in our area is suitable / capable / qualified.	6	
Person is only after personal gain / will only look after himself and his family's needs / don't care for us.	6	
Person will forget us after the elections.	3	
Outsider will be fair / work harder / be honest / make a difference.	2	
Other prefer outsider comments.	1	
<b>Does not matter</b>		9
It makes no difference who you vote for – there is no change.	3	
As long as the work is done.	2	
Other indifference comments.	2	
As long as the person has necessary skills / leadership.	1	
It makes no difference whether you vote or not.	1	
<b>Other</b>		2
Other miscellaneous comments.	2	
<b>Don't know</b>		3
Don't know / can't explain.	2	
No reason / nothing.	1	

related to the first, but focused on the issues of *proximity*, *familiarity* and *trust*. Issues of *constituency service* were the third most frequently cited (22 per cent). Most of those who had indicated they did not vote for a local candidate either felt that the issue of local versus non-local candidates did not really matter, or were skeptical of the motives or abilities of anyone from their own area.

Two-thirds (64 per cent) agreed with the statement that members of Parliament should 'live close to the people they represent' so they can 'express their opinions and promote their interests', although one-third (32 per cent) agreed that 'it does not matter' where MPs live in order for them to represent voters. Finally, a majority (53 per cent) agreed that all party candidates should 'be chosen by members of that party' before the final election rather than by party leaders, something which can be accomplished in party caucuses or more inclusive direct primary elections.

At the same time, it should be noted that respondents' enthusiasm for local control of national or provincial legislators is not fully matched by their assessments of their new ward representatives to local government councillors. The reformed

*Table 12: Localised versus centralised control of political parties*

<b>Localised</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Centralised</b>
Members of Parliament need to live close to the people they represent in order for them to express their opinions and promote their interests.	64	4	32	It does not matter where Members of Parliament live for them to do a good job in representing the voters.
All political party candidates for Parliament should be chosen by members of that party before they stand for election.	53	8	39	The leaders of political parties should choose their candidates, as they know which people will become good representatives.

*Which of these statements do you agree with most?*

local government system, as put into practice in the Local Government Elections of 2000, has established a mixed system composed of both types of councillor. While just 38 per cent said that ward councillors represented them best, this figure was almost twice that who said the party list councillors were the best representatives (20 per cent). One-quarter (24 per cent) saw no difference, and a final 17 per cent did not know.

Again, the racial profiles on this issue are remarkably similar. On the open question about why people prefer local candidates, there were few statistically significant and no important racial differences in the propensity to cite reasons of representation or proximity / familiarity. Black and coloured respondents (23 per cent of each) are about twice as likely to cite constituency service than are white or Indian respondents (13 and 14 per cent respectively); but the point is that this is a minority viewpoint among all groups. While Indian (24 per cent) and black respondents (19 per cent) are more likely to distrust the motives or capabilities of local candidates than are coloured (15 per cent) or white respondents (seven per cent), the point again is that this is a minority sentiment in all communities. Large majorities of black, white and coloured respondents want to vote for a local candidate. Black respondents are most likely to agree that candidates should be selected by grassroots membership rather than party leaders, and that MPs need to live close to those they represent.

*Table 13: Localised versus centralised control of political parties (by race)*

	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>
Wants to vote for candidate from area in which they live.	71	73	75	61
MPs need to live close to the people to express their opinions and promote their interests.	66	60	59	60
Party members should choose all party candidates before they stand for election.	54	51	48	46

**Individual autonomy versus internal party discipline** The same type of considerations discussed in the previous section also conspire to produce very different capabilities for party leaders to impose programmatic consistency onto their members. Systems differ considerably in the autonomy they create for elected legislators, particularly with regard to whether voters directly elect candidates or whether they only vote for candidate lists prepared by political parties. Of course, in practice there are multiple ways in which constituency and list systems can be mixed, but the clear tendency is that individual legislators are more likely to exercise autonomy if they are subject to simultaneous pressures from their constituents (from below) and from the party leadership (from above). In contrast, candidates elected simply from a party list tend to be cut off from the voters between elections and hence subject only to the direct pressure of party leadership. Because the party, rather than the individual, 'owns' the legislative seat, party leaders are even able to move legislators in and out of the legislature at will.

The next set of questions addresses the degree of individual autonomy versus loyalty to the party South Africans want an electoral system to produce. The results suggest that they believe that an electoral system should work to produce an environment in which the voters, rather than party leaders, elect and remove legislative representatives. While respondents are more divided, the balance of opinion believes legislators should be able to criticise their party or oppose the party line when voting on legislation.

Fifty-four per cent agree that elected officials should serve out their terms, as opposed to 38 per cent who agree that party leaders should have the right to redeploy elected members to other jobs outside Parliament. A majority (51 per cent) agree that elected representatives should have freedom of expression to criticise their own parties, while 44 per cent say that legislators owe their loyalty to their political party. Forty-seven per cent say that MPs should be able to vote according to their own beliefs, while 44 per cent say they should always vote according to the party line.



Again, these sentiments are spread fairly evenly across the racial groups. Black respondents are slightly more likely to favour the ‘party’ and whites slightly more likely to favour individual autonomy. However, what is probably the most significant finding, because of their demographic majority amongst the electorate, is that 53 per cent of black respondents want legislators to have a secure seat that cannot be changed by party leaders and nearly 50 per cent want legislators to be able to exercise their own judgement independently of their party.

Table 14: Individual autonomy versus internal party discipline

Autonomy of the MP	Agree	Don't know	Agree	Party discipline
Once a person is elected to Parliament, they should stay there until the next election.	54	8	38	The party leadership should have the right to deploy Members of Parliament to another job outside Parliament.
Members of Parliament should be able to criticise their own political party.	51	5	44	Members of Parliament should always be loyal to their party leaders because they were elected on their party's platform.
Members of Parliament should vote according to their own beliefs.	47	5	44	Members of Parliament should always vote the way their party decides.

Which of these statements do you agree with most?

Table 15: Individual autonomy versus internal party discipline (by race)

	Black	White	Coloured	Indian
Once elected, MPs should stay in parliament until next election.	53	59	55	49
MPs should be able to criticise their own party.	49	61	50	38
MPs should vote according to their own beliefs.	45	61	58	58

**Representation versus legislative efficiency** Pure proportional representation systems with low vote thresholds (such as South Africa's) tend to produce large numbers of small political parties with legislative seats, and may complicate the organisation and operation of a legislature. Many of these concerns can be minimised if PR produces a tightly disciplined majority party. However, if there is no majority party, more time and effort will be required to bargain over the allocation of committee seats, question time and speaking time and, to the extent that consent is required, slow the legislative process. On the other end of the spectrum, purely constituency-based systems with single-member districts tend to produce two-party systems and artificially strong legislative majorities.<sup>18</sup> While this may exclude many voices, scholars argue that it produces efficient and 'responsible' government by reducing the need for bargaining and compromise.<sup>19</sup> Representation and efficiency are both qualities which are extremely important to the health of any democracy, yet there is clearly a tension between them (as is demonstrated, for instance, by the existence of the 'guillotine' in various Parliaments whereby governments are able to limit the length of debate on particular issues and thereby prevent filibustering). Where do South Africans situate themselves on this question?

When posed with a choice between these two poles, most South Africans come down on the end of broad representation. Six out ten (59 per cent) say that the most important purpose of Parliament is to represent all parts of society, even if it requires more time for debate; one-third (34 per cent) feel that too many voices will paralyse the process, thus necessitating a strong majority. A similar 59 per cent say that Parliament should contain as many political parties as necessary, while a third (35 per cent) agree that too many parties may make Parliament unmanageable.

Table 16: Representation versus legislative efficiency

Representation	Agree most	Don't know	Agree most	Efficiency
The most important thing is for Parliament to represent all parts of society, even if it takes longer to debate and make decisions.	59	7	34	A Parliament that represents too many opinions will not be able to make decisions easily, so it is important to have a party with a strong majority that can pass laws and get things done.
Parliament should be able to represent as many parties as possible.	59	7	35	Too many parties may make Parliament unmanageable.

Which of these statements do you agree with most?

Yet again, opinion on these issues is relatively evenly spread across the racial groups. If there is any significant nuance it would appear to be that – perhaps in contrast to their relatively stronger support for independent candidates and the autonomy of MPs – white respondents give higher priority to legislative efficiency than other voters.

Table 17: Representation versus efficiency in legislatures (by race)

	Black	White	Coloured	Indian
Parliament should represent all parts of society, even if takes longer to take decisions.	60	56	59	61
Parliament should represent as many parties as possible.	61	49	54	57

**Direct election of the President:** One question item simply asked people whether or not they would like to vote for the President directly. At present, South Africa's President is first elected to Parliament on a party list before being elected by Parliament. In contrast to this practice, 63 per cent of the

public want the President to be directly elected by the voters, not by Parliament. Of those who wanted a direct vote, the survey then asked whether they wanted the President to be elected at the same time as Parliament: 85 per cent said ‘yes’.

*Table 18: Direct election of the President*

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
At present, the President is elected by Parliament. Would you like to vote for the President directly?	63	28	9
If Yes, would you like to vote for the President at the same time that you vote for Parliament?	85	12	2

*Table 19: Direct election of the President (by race)*

	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>
Would like to vote for the President directly.	63	64	58	63

Yet again, the racial profile on this issue is remarkably similar: direct election of the President is a majority preference amongst every group of voters.

At the same time, it should be noted that the survey did not ask respondents whether they wanted to strengthen the Presidency relative to either Parliament or their political party (a likely outcome of such a significant constitutional change). Given respondents’ fairly strongly expressed views in favour of the relative autonomy of MPs and their support for local candidates, it could be that they would be cautious about any move that might weaken the legislature relative to the executive. On the other hand, they might reckon that a stronger President relative to Parliament might represent a shift in favour of stronger checks and balances. This is clearly one aspect of our investigation that requires more research.

**Women’s representation** Finally, the survey posed two issues about women’s representation in Parliament. The South African Parliament has one of the highest proportions of women legislators in the world (30 per cent).<sup>20</sup> Our respondents were not reminded of this achievement, nor were they given any information concerning the number of women in either Parliament or the individual provincial legislatures. However, when asked to consider whether the existing gender balance in Parliament was sufficient, 43 per cent felt that there were still ‘too few’ women in Parliament, while one-quarter (28 per cent) felt the number was sufficient; 11 per cent said there were ‘too many’. Another 18 per cent said they did not know. We then asked people whether parties should be required to nominate more women as candidates, to which 63 per cent responded that they should.

*Table 20: Presence of women in Parliament*

	<b>Too many</b>	<b>Sufficient</b>	<b>Too few</b>	<b>Don’t know</b>
Think about the number of women in Parliament. Do you think that too few, sufficient or too many women get elected?	11	28	43	18

*Table 21: Should parties be required to nominate more women?*

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don’t know</b>
Do you think that the political parties should be required to nominate more women for election?	63	26	10

These views are consistent with the broader desire that South Africa’s legislatures should be as broadly representative as possible. However, in other ways, these views might be seen to conflict with respondents’ desire for local candidates and localised control over candidate selection. The reason the South African Parliament has been able to achieve such a relatively high proportion of women is because political parties have chosen consciously to nominate women to their party lists (with

the ANC, for instance, having adopted the rule that one-third of its candidates' lists must be composed of women). The list system has also enabled parties to manipulate the entire demographic profile of the candidates they offer for election, so that, for instance, apart from ensuring a given proportion of women, they can also ensure (if they so desire) a given proportion of demographic minorities (notably white, coloured or Indian candidates). In contrast, parties are far less able to influence the demographic profiles of their candidates in straight-forward constituency systems, simply because constituency parties tend to insist on making their own choice of candidate. Electoral systems that mix constituency and list representation, on the other hand, may be able to meet the voters' desire to select and control their own legislators with their desire to ensure that parties nominate more women.

### **The democratic consequences of attitudes towards the electoral system**

Now that we have described the extent and distribution of positive public assessments of the current voting system, and preferences about the values that they want from an ideal system, the last obvious question is the extent to which any of this matters. In other words, are people who have more negative views about the current system any more or less likely to have positive views of the democratic process, or to take part in it? In this section, we examine the linkages of public views of the electoral system to three key democratic outcomes measured in the survey: Do people feel that elections matter? Do they think that representative institutions are concerned with public opinion? And, finally, are they willing to vote in future elections?

Let us begin by examining the actual responses to these questions. Two-thirds (67 per cent) see elections as consequential and agree with the statement that 'it is important who is in power because it can make a difference to our lives'. In contrast, three in ten (29 per cent) feel that 'it doesn't really matter who is in power, because in the end things go on much the same'.

Table 22: Importance of elections

	Agree	Don't know	Agree most	
It is important who is in power because it can make a difference to our lives.	67	4	29	It doesn't really matter who is in power, because in the end things go on much the same.

*Which of these statements do you agree with most?*

When it comes to likely future voting behaviour, eight in ten South Africans say they want to vote in 2004 (33 per cent) or want to do so very much (49 per cent).

Table 23: Desire to vote in 2004

	Percent
I definitely do not want to vote.	8
I do not really want to vote.	5
I do not know.	5
I want to vote.	33
I definitely want to vote.	49

*How much do you want to vote in the next general election in 2004?*

Yet people are far less sanguine about the performance of the representatives and representative institutions produced by those very elections. This is a matter we shall return to at the end of this paper. But for now, we note that less than one in five believes that MPs 'try their best to look after the interests of people like you' (19 per cent) or 'listen to what people like you have to say' (19 per cent). We find almost exactly the same responses when the two questions are asked about elected members of provincial government.<sup>21</sup>

*Table 24: Responsiveness of national and provincial legislators*

	<b>Always</b>	<b>Most of the time</b>	<b>Some of the time</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
To look after the interests of people like you? (Parliament)	5	14	38	36	6
To listen to what people like you have to say? (Parliament)	5	14	37	38	6
To look after the interests of people like you? (provincial assembly)	5	14	36	38	6
To listen to what people like you have to say? (provincial assembly)	5	14	36	39	6

*How often do you think elected representatives in Parliament / provincial government try their best?*

To what extent do these key democratic predispositions and evaluations depend on their views of the voting system? First of all, we find little support for the proposition that South Africans base their assessments of the efficacy of democratic elections on their views of the current electoral system. We regressed perceptions of democratic efficacy on the full range of demographic, attitudinal and behavioural measures already used in Tables 5 and 6, including assessments of the freeness and fairness, and political accountability, of the current system. The results show that these variables collectively only account for three per cent of the variance. Obviously, whether or not people think democratic elections matter has little to do with how they evaluate the current system.

However, we see much stronger linkages between views of the current system and whether or not people believe provincial and national legislators are responsive to public opinion (Table 25). In fact, whether or not people believe the current system produces equal and fair outcomes, or whether it produces political accountability, are the two most important determinants of perceptions of responsiveness. Other key



predictors include the rate at which people have participated in elections since 1994, the rate with which they participate in politics between elections, and their interest in politics. No demographic predictors, such as race, age, education or gender, are significant. Thus, if one wants to improve the public's poor images of their public representatives, a good way to do it would be to improve voters' perceptions of the system by which they are elected and re-elected.

Table 25: Determinants of perceived responsiveness of legislators

	Standardized coefficients (Beta)
<b>Attitudes toward current system</b>	
Believes current electoral system produces equality and fairness.	.19***
Believes current electoral system produces political accountability.	.16***
<b>Political behaviours</b>	
Record of voting participation since 1994.	.06**
Participates in political activity between elections.	.05*
<b>Other political attitudes</b>	
Interested in politics.	.05*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.15

*Dependent variable: index of perceived responsiveness of elected legislators*

Finally, we also find important linkages between views of the current system and future voting behaviour (Table 26). While one's past voting record since 1994 is the most accurate predictor of likely future voting, assessments of the electoral system exercise an independent impact. Interest in politics and identification with a political party also turn out to be significant predictors of future voting.

What does all this mean? Quite simply, the current system's public image matters. This brings us back to the question we

Table 26: Determinants of likely voting turnout in 2004

	Standardized coefficients (Beta)
<b>Political behaviors</b>	
Record of voting participation since 1994.	.25***
<b>Attitudes toward current system</b>	
Believes current electoral system produces equal and fair outcomes.	.14***
Believes current electoral system produces political accountability.	.10***
<b>Other political attitudes</b>	
Interested in politics.	.13***
Identifies with a political party.	.07**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.20

*Dependent variable: desire to vote in 2004 election*

set out early in this paper. While strong majorities believe the current voting system produces fair and equal outcomes, and political accountability, we also noted that significant minorities disagreed with these assessments and asked whether key fixtures of the democratic system should not enjoy broader and higher levels of public support. Tables 25 and 26 may produce part of the answer. What they demonstrate is that those sizable minorities who offered negative assessments of the system are indeed more likely to believe that the representatives elected through that system do not care about their opinions or interests, and are also less likely to vote in 2004.

Those interested in improving public images of the electoral system would do well to look to the several values (outlined in the section of this report headed ‘What do South Africans want out of an electoral system?’) that are emphasised by large proportions of public opinion, but which the current voting system is ill placed to produce.

## Conclusion

Two main sets of findings seem to be most pertinent to the ETT's task. First, South Africans recognise the significant achievements of the current system of proportional representation in producing fair results and treating voters and parties equally, as well as producing legislatures that are broadly representative of the population in both demographic and political terms. Thus there is little demand for a radical shift away from proportional representation. There is only minority preference for the type of candidate-centred, weak party system that a 'first-past-the-post' system can encourage (as in the United States). Indeed, for the most part, people are happy with the present system.

If South Africans are generally satisfied with what they have, does this mean that the ETT should say simply 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'? We feel the evidence provided by the survey answers in the negative. First of all, public satisfaction with the current system is not consensual or widespread. Significantly higher proportions are dissatisfied than one would prefer, given that a voting system is an integral part of the overall constitutional framework. We have also shown that those people who are dissatisfied with the system are more likely to believe their legislators do not care about their opinions and interests, and are more likely to opt out of the process in the future.

Second, while South Africans appreciate that the existing system produces proportionality, inclusiveness and fairness, they also emphasise other values that a pure list-based version of proportional representation has difficulty producing: values such as independently-minded legislators accountable to local grassroots opinion.

Finally, far from saying 'it ain't broke', other survey results suggest strongly that the system *is* 'broke' in at least one very important way. As we have already reported, this survey finds that just one in five voters feels that their national or provincial legislators are interested in listening to their opinions or

looking after their interests. Left unchecked, such views threaten to turn into a cancer in the body politic that slowly eats away at public confidence in democratic institutions.

While Parliament has tried to address the issues of constituency representation and constituency service by assigning putative constituencies to MPs, the results have been dismal. An Afrobarometer survey in July-August 2000 found that just two per cent could even hazard a guess as to the name of their assigned MP. In contrast, 84 per cent of Malawians, 73 per cent of Batswana and 54 per cent of Zimbabweans could provide the correct names of their MPs. In that same survey, just two-tenths of one per cent – that is, four of 2200 respondents – told us that they had made contact with an MP or gone to a parliamentary outreach office in the previous year. This was by far the lowest in Southern Africa.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, the survey results demonstrated a strong impact of electoral systems in southern Africa. The two countries with proportional representation, South Africa and Namibia (one per cent), had the lowest levels of citizen contact with national legislators. By contrast, the figures were far higher in the countries with constituency-based systems: eight per cent of Zimbabweans, seven per cent of Zambians, six per cent of Basotho and five per cent of Malawians had met an MP or gone to a parliamentary outreach office (Botswana was the ‘outlier’ with a contact rate of just two per cent). While all these figures may sound low, there is a huge difference between one out of every ten or 20 people in each community with links to an elected national representative, and one out of every 100 or 200.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, evidence from this and other surveys strongly suggests the need to increase rates of public participation and contact with formal political institutions and procedures other than simply voting in five-yearly elections. Taken together, the evidence suggests that voters would support amending the existing electoral system to augment proportional representation with some form of directly elected, constituency-based

representatives in order to provide a stronger link between themselves and their representatives and to give them greater control over those representatives.

The introduction of a constituency system would not, in itself, resolve all the issues surrounding voters' sense that South Africa's legislators are not adequately responsive to their needs. A fuller sense of accountability may be as much a product of how much political parties deliberately structure their policies to the needs and expressed wants of voters, how willing they are to disclose the sources of their funding, how closely they interact with interest groups and organs of civil society, and so on, as it will be of a change in the electoral system. Nonetheless, the introduction of some form of constituency representation, even if not a sufficient step to enhance politicians' accountability, seems a necessary one, and one that would provide for a direct link between voters and politicians. It would enable the former, in some sense, to exercise a degree of 'ownership' over the latter and to increase the sense of obligation of the latter to the former, especially between elections. The introduction of constituencies would create incentives for legislators to listen to voters, if only because of their self interest in winning their constituents' votes at the next election.

This survey of popular attitudes towards the present electoral system would seem to suggest that eligible voters would favour the introduction of some form of Mixed Member *Proportional* system, that is, a system that maintains representivity whilst enhancing prospects for accountability. In the present South African context, a return to single-member constituencies, even within a system of MMP, does not seem practicable (not least because of the problems of demarcation). However, the introduction of multi-member constituencies, wherein voters would vote for closed lists of candidates offered by parties (alongside national lists of candidates provided by the parties for national elections and perhaps similar provincial lists of candidates provided by

parties in provincial elections), would be immediately feasible, especially if constituencies were geared to existing municipal demarcations as suggested by various options presented by Du Plessis.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to stress that the introduction of multi-member constituencies within some form of MMP would in no way detract from the high levels of representivity achieved under the present system, precisely because it would remain *proportional*. Nor, importantly, would it in any way prevent political parties from nominating desired proportions of women, or indeed desired proportions of candidates drawn from the racial minorities, to electable positions on national, provincial or constituency lists. In short, whilst an MMP system would ensure the proportional representation of parties (as it does at the moment), the responsibility for ensuring the demographic representivity of legislators would remain with the political parties themselves. Were this recommendation to be adopted by the ETT, then further thought might be given to whether a residency requirement might be required for candidates standing for election in constituencies, and whether political parties might be required to follow procedures which would enhance grassroots participation in the selection of constituency candidates. These and similar such measures could serve to strengthen the bonds between voters and their representatives in the way that this survey indicates that ordinary people want.

South Africa's adoption of a proportional representation system in 1994 proved a vital step in the establishment of the present democracy. Amendments to the status quo designed to enhance accountability whilst maintaining fairness, inclusiveness and simplicity – key aspirations of the South African electoral system as it stands<sup>25</sup> – would go some way to increasing levels of popular political participation, and the legitimacy of the electoral system to the nation as a whole.

## End notes

- 1 Full details concerning the questionnaire and survey methodology can be obtained, on request, from the ETT, from the ETT Technical Report, Parts I, II and III. However, the Report does not acknowledge the important roles played by Craig Schwabe and Jacques Pietersen of the Surveys, Analysis, Mapping and Modelling programme of the HSRC in drawing the sample and undertaking the weighting of the data. The authors would like to record their deep gratitude.
- 2 For a review of the factors leading to the adoption of this type of electoral system, see Robert Mattes, 'The Road to Democracy: From 2 February 1990 to 27 April 1994,' in *Andrew Reynolds (ed) Elections '94 South Africa: The Campaigns, Results and Future Prospects*, (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1994); and Timothy Sisk, *Democratization in South Africa: The Elusive Social Contract*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- 3 These question items are reported as a group, and separate from subsequent questions because statistical analyses known as factor analysis and reliability analysis verified that responses to them formed a valid and reliable factor that explained 63,7 percent of the common variance (Eigenvalue = 2,55) with a reliability score (Kronbach's Alpha) of 0,80. The item that most strongly defined the scale was equal treatment of all parties (factor loading of 0,82) and the weakest whether the system is fair to all parties (0,58).
- 4 Arend Lijphart, *Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A Study of Twenty Seven Democracies, 1945–1990*. Oxford University Press: New York. 1994; Andrew Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Democratization in Southern Africa*. Oxford University Press: New York. 1999.
- 5 David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1966.

- 6 Factor analysis and reliability analysis indicates that these items form a unique, valid and reliable factor that explains 44,7 per cent of the common variance with a reliability score (Kronabach's Alpha) of 0,75. The item that most strongly defined the factor is whether the system holds all parties accountable (0,68) and the weakest whether it enables voters to influence government (0,43).
- 7 Herman Giliomee and Charles Simkins (eds), *The Awkward Embrace: One-Party Domination and Democracy*. Tafelberg: Cape Town. 1999; Hermann Giliomee, James Myburgh and Lawrence Schlemmer, 'Dominant Party Rule, Opposition Parties and Minorities in Contemporary South Africa', in Roger Southall (ed), *Opposition and Democracy in South Africa*. Frank Cass: London and Portland Oregon. 2001: p. 161–182.
- 8 The concept of 'anticipated reactions' comes from Carl Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy: Theory and Practice in Europe and America*. Quinn and Co.: Boston. 1950.
- 9 Joel Barkan, 'Elections in Agrarian Societies', *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 4, 1995: p. 106–116.
- 10 Statistically, the correlations (Eta) of race and an index of satisfaction with the fairness of the current system is 0,43 which means that race statistically accounts for 18 per cent of the variance in attitudes toward the electoral system. Clearly there are many other things that affect how people think about politics than merely their racial categorisation.
- 11 Eta = 0,30, significant at 0,001.
- 12 Multiple regression is a tool that helps assess the correlation of a set of independent, or predictor variables on a dependent variable (in this case, attitudes toward the electoral system). It enables us to determine how well the entire set of predictor variables correlates with the dependent variables. It also identifies the correlation



between a specific independent variable and the dependent variable controlling for the simultaneous correlation of that variable with all the other independent variables.

- 13 Unfortunately, we cannot test this interpretation directly since the ETT chose not to ask respondents with which political party they identified.
- 14 Turnout in 1994 was estimated at 87 per cent of all eligible voters (there was no voters' list). In 1999, 89 per cent of some 18,2 million registered voters went to the polls. The overall turnout rate, however, differed depending on whether one used the IEC's estimate that 81 per cent of all eligible voters had registered (which puts turnout at 72 per cent) or survey-based estimates of 76 per cent (which puts actual turnout at 68 per cent of all eligible voters). Whichever figure is used, the 1999 registration figure compares unfavourably with most established democracies, except the United States. However the actual turnout figure compares favourably to second-generation elections in the rest of Africa but also to elections in established democracies in the West. See Andrew Reynolds, 'The Results', in his edited *Election '99 South Africa: From Mandela to Mbeki*. James Currey: London, David Philip: Cape Town and St. Martin's Press: New York.
- 15 Pearson's  $r = 0,03$ , significance = 0,156.
- 16 Pearson's  $r = 0,13$ , significance = 0,000.
- 17 This meaning accords with the view of South African elections offered by Steven Friedman, 'Who we are: voter participation, rationality and the 1999 election', *Politikon*, 26, 2, 1999: p. 213–24.
- 18 W.J.M Mackenzie, *Free Elections: An Elementary Textbook*. George Allen and Unwin: London. 1958.
- 19 American Political Science Association (APSA). *Towards A More Responsible Two Party System*. APSA: Washington

- D.C. p. 1947.
- 20 Only Norway, Sweden, Iceland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand and Mozambique record higher levels of membership of women in their lower houses of Parliament. See United Nations Development Programme, 'Women's Political Participation' in *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*. Oxford University Press. New York. 2002: p. 239–242.
  - 21 While technically inconsistent with the questions about (national) parliamentarians, we used the term 'members of provincial government' rather than 'provincial assemblies' because pilot tests indicated many people were not familiar with the term 'provincial assembly'.
  - 22 See Robert Mattes, Yul Derek Davids & Cherrel Africa, 'Views of Democracy in Southern Africa and the Region: Trends and Comparisons'. Afrobarometer Working Papers, No. 10. Idasa: Cape Town, CDD: Accra and Michigan State University: East Lansing. 2000.
  - 23 Robert Mattes, 'Democracy Without the People: Economics, Governance and Representation in South Africa', *Journal of Democracy*, 13/1 (January 2002): p. 22–36.
  - 24 Norman Du Plessis, 'An Electoral System for South Africa: Various Options', South African Electoral System Review Roundtable. Electoral Task Team: Cape Town. 9–10 September 2002.
  - 25 Wilmot James and Adrian Hadland, 'Shared Aspirations: The Imperative of Accountability in South Africa's Electoral System', South African Electoral System Review Roundtable. Electoral Task Team: Cape Town. 9–10 September 2002.

## Appendix A

*Determinants of evaluations of the equality and fairness of the current electoral system*

	<b>Unstandardized coefficients (B)</b>	<b>Standard error</b>	<b>Standardized coefficients (Beta)</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
(Constant)	1.608	.119		13.518	.000
<b>Demographics</b>					
Lives in urban area	.0484	.027	.038	1.797	.073
Neighborhood consists of all / mostly formal housing	-.0277	.021	-.031	-1.312	.190
Female	-.0295	.025	-.023	-1.203	.229
Education	.0209	.010	.049	2.091	.037
White	-.6460	.038	-.416	-17.060	.000
Coloured	-.2430	.036	-.146	-6.759	.000
Indian	-.2270	.051	-.090	-4.413	.000
<b>Political Attitudes</b>					
Political knowledge	-.0266	.035	-.017	-.765	.445
Interested in politics	.0620	.017	.077	3.728	.000
Identifies with a political party	.0792	.025	.064	3.119	.002
Approves of performance of elected representatives	.160	.012	.272	13.844	.000
<b>Political behaviour</b>					
Non-voting political participation	-.0899	.063	-.032	-1.434	.152
Contacts officials and leaders	.0716	.029	.051	2.458	.014
Voted in elections since 1994	.109	.025	.086	4.371	.000
N					
Standard error of the regression					0.4900
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>					.371

*Dependent variable: index of perceived equality and fairness of current system*

## Appendix B

*Determinants of evaluations of the political accountability produced by the current electoral system*

	<b>Unstandardized coefficients (B)</b>	<b>Standard error</b>	<b>Standardized coefficients (Beta)</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
(Constant)	1.550	.115		13.491	.000
<b>Demographics</b>					
Lives in urban area	.0338	.026	.030	1.301	.193
Neighborhood consists of all / mostly formal housing	-.0594	.020	-.075	-2.921	.004
Female	.0171	.024	.015	.725	.469
Education	-.0059	.010	-.015	-.606	.545
White	-.3540	.037	-.253	-9.668	.000
Coloured	.0163	.035	.011	.470	.638
Indian	.0469	.050	.021	.947	.344
<b>Political Attitudes</b>					
Political knowledge	.0244	.034	.018	.726	.468
Interested in politics	.0611	.016	.085	3.809	.000
Identifies with a political party	.1170	.024	.106	4.792	.000
Approves of performance of elected representatives	.1420	.011	.268	12.711	.000
<b>Political behaviour</b>					
Non-voting political participation	.0765	.061	.030	1.261	.207
Contacts officials and leaders	-.0005	.028	.000	-.019	.985
Voted in elections since 1994	.0926	.024	.082	3.856	.000
N					
Standard error of the regression					0.47226
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>					.275

*Dependent variable: index of perceived accountability of current system*

## Appendix C

*Determinants of perceptions of responsiveness of national and provincial legislators*

	<b>Unstandardized coefficients (B)</b>	<b>Standard error</b>	<b>Standardized coefficients (Beta)</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
(Constant)	-.4406	.221		-1.837	.066
<b>Demographics</b>					
Female	.0754	.047	.035	1.594	.111
Age	.0009	.002	.013	.584	.559
Education	-.0014	.037	-.001	-.038	.970
White	-.140	.078	-.052	-1.801	.072
Coloured	-.0204	.066	-.007	-.311	.756
Indian	-.154	.096	-.036	-1.602	.109
<b>Political Attitudes</b>					
Interested in politics	.0853	.031	.062	2.716	.007
Political knowledge	.0835	.064	.032	1.307	.191
Identifies with a political party	.0915	.048	.044	1.893	.058
Thinks current voting system is fair and equal	.326	.047	.191	6.994	.000
Thinks current voting system produces political accountability	.305	.049	.160	6.243	.000
<b>Political behaviour</b>					
Voted regularly since 1994	.136	.050	.063	2.738	.006
N					
Standard error of the regression					1928
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>					.15

*Dependent variable: index of perceived responsiveness of elected representatives*

## Appendix D

*Determinants of likely voting behavior in 2004*

	<b>Unstandardized coefficients (B)</b>	<b>Standard error</b>	<b>Standardized coefficients (Beta)</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
(Constant)	.364	.253	1.441	.150	
<b>Demographics</b>					
Female	.0407	.054	.016	.750	.453
Age	-.0008	.002	-.010	-.470	.638
Education	.0023	.043	.001	.054	.957
White	.1290	.089	.041	1.450	.147
Coloured	-.0994	.075	-.030	-1.321	.187
Indian	-.5096	.111	-.010	-.460	.646
<b>Political Attitudes</b>					
Interested in politics	.2260	.036	.140	6.292	.000
Political knowledge	-.0625	.073	-.020	-.854	.393
Identifies with a political party	.190	.055	.076	3.437	.001
Thinks current voting system is fair and equal	.285	.053	.141	5.329	.000
Thinks current voting system produces political accountability	.230	.056	.102	4.114	.000
<b>Political behaviour</b>					
Voted regularly since 1994	.634	.057	.248	11.110	.000
N					1931
Standard error of the regression					1.0535
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>					.20

*Dependent variable: desire to vote in 2004*

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