Chapter 11

The Effects of Digital Technology on Elections in South Africa

Maxwell M. Maseko
Wits University

Abstract

This chapter examines the effect that digital technologies have had on elections in South Africa, specifically the voter management devices piloted in the 2021 municipal elections. The elections were held during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and are said to be the most technologically advanced yet by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) (Mzekandaba, 2021). This chapter aims to answer three key research questions that relate to: firstly, the extent to which local political processes in South Africa are being influenced by technological transformation; secondly, the opportunities presented by digital technologies for participation in an election; thirdly, South Africa's readiness to adopt e-voting as an alternative to traditional methods of voting. It relies on theories of democracy and communication networks to analyse the data collected from various secondary sources. The work will benefit election officials, policymakers, scholars, and others interested in advancing research in this emerging field of study. While various challenges exist with the use of technology in elections, this should not dissuade authorities from embracing the latest online methods to boost election management.

Keywords; Digital Technologies, Elections, South Africa, COVID-19, Participation

Digital Technology Defined

It is necessary to begin by defining digital technology so as to better understand the concept within the South African context, which is the focus of this chapter. Johnston, Kervin, and Wyeth (2022) and several other scholars argue that the definition of digital technology is broad and includes tools, systems, and devices (including personal computers and mobile phones) that can generate, create, store, or process data. In keeping with the aims of this chapter, the expected result of using digital technology in elections in South Africa is improved citizen engagement and increased participation using various devices, such as voter management devices and other online platforms, including social media. This chapter seeks to answer three key research questions.

1. To what extent are local political processes in South Africa influenced by technological transformation?
2. What new opportunities do digital technologies present for citizen participation in future elections?
3. Is South Africa ready to adopt e-voting as an alternative to traditional voting methods?

Data was collected from various secondary sources. This included: examining relevant official statements made by the IEC on the use of technology in elections during COVID-19 (2021 local government election); scrutinising online media interviews/press conferences with the Chief Electoral Officer, and other official government communication related to the 2021 local government elections. Perspectives were also analysed based on official statements made by political parties and independent candidates who participated in the 2021 municipal election, and civil society organisations that represent voters.

Background and Context

The digital revolution has not only transformed the power dynamics between the state and society, it has also reshaped the practice of democracy globally. Elections are key in a democracy, as they contribute fundamentally to democratic governance by allowing citizens to choose their leaders. It is also a widely held view among scholars that credible elections must reflect the free expression of the will of the people. To achieve this, scholars and practitioners argue that elections must be transparent, inclusive, accountable, and ensure equitable participation in the voting process. However, recent research shows that countries such as South Africa are still facing challenges, including voter apathy (especially among the youth), which is evidenced in low voter turnout and declining registration numbers in elections. A worsening digital divide has also cast doubt on traditional methods of participation in an election (Matsheza, 2011; Van Dijk and Hacker, 2003). To solve some of these challenges, government leaders are now looking online for answers. In this chapter, the author argues for the adoption of digital technologies to boost election management in South Africa.

The global impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on elections is well-documented and it forced many countries to revise their strategies to protect the integrity and credibility of this key democratic process (Zamfir and Fardel, 2020). Between February 2020 and February 2022, at least 80 countries postponed their national and regional elections due to COVID-19 (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2023). To boost election management in the 2021 local election, South Africa's IEC piloted the use of new online voter management devices (VMDs) to capture voter information electronically and locate voters in their correct voting districts. The piloting of the project seemed ideal for the IEC and the country, given the proximity of local elections to the people and the community-based nature of the process. According to Mzekandaba (2021), the VMDs replaced the old voter registration devices known as Zip-Zip scanners, which the IEC had used for about 20 years. IEC official records show that over 30,000 VMDs were deployed countrywide during the 2021 local government elections. They were centrally connected through an access point network.

The debate and discussion about the role of technology in improving the credibility of elections and enhancing participation is not entirely new. According to Tracey-Temba (2013), in the lead-up to the 2014 national election, South Africa was already seeing a big change in political campaigning, with the rise of the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), MySpace, and YouTube. Furthermore, in 2020, South Africa's Department of Home Affairs introduced the Electoral Laws Amendment Bill (Electoral Bill). The Bill introduced provisions that allowed the IEC to prescribe a different method of voting for national, provincial, and local elections. However, Parliament's Home Affairs Committee ruled that a voting method was a policy matter that could not be left to the IEC alone to decide (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2020). In this chapter, scrutiny of VMDs as an alternative method for participating in an election is, therefore, necessary to determine their appropriateness for future elections in South Africa. Furthermore, Mathe (2022) argues that a careful analysis of the role of digital technologies in managing elections is necessary, considering South Africa's unique socio-political climate. Challenges in terms of the country's social-political climate can be traced back to prolonged periods of exploitative colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, and a brutal apartheid system (Khapoya, 2012).

In terms of layout, this chapter begins by defining digital technology to help the reader understand the problem in the South African context. It then focuses on the main research questions, followed by the methodology. A theoretical perspective of the chapter is then provided, followed by an overview of the literature that focuses on various perspectives regarding the effect of digital technologies on elections globally and in South Africa, including examples from countries that have implemented digital voting systems. The chapter also discusses the state of governance and democracy in South Africa and Internet access and supports digital technology interventions to boost election management and citizen participation/engagement. Diverse views on the digitalisation of elections in South Africa have been sourced from political parties and civil society. of the findings and conclusions are also discussed.