INTRODUCTION

South Africa’s liberation struggle and democratisation process culminated in the 1994 national and provincial elections in which the majority of the electorate was finally liberated from white colonial rule under apartheid. These elections have often been referred to as the ‘liberation elections’ in which the African National Congress (ANC) was democratically elected to lead the Government of National Unity (GNU) which led the country in the transition from apartheid to democracy. The elections signified a new political order in which blacks gained the full citizenship that had previously been reserved exclusively for whites. Indeed, the 1994 elections, together with the 1995/96 local government elections, marked the first voting experience for roughly 80 per cent of the South African population. One of the most significant democratic exercises has therefore been the education of first-time voters, many of them illiterate, about the mechanics of voting in democratic elections (Ballington and Fick 1999, 91).

More than 19 million newly enfranchised citizens voted in the April 1994 election. As 400 newly elected Members of Parliament took their seats in the National Assembly in May 1994, South Africa’s new democracy emerged victorious. A significant achievement was the number of women who took up their seats alongside their male counterparts. However, equally impressive was the high number of women (thought to be more than the number of men) who turned out to vote on polling day. Gouws argues in
chapter 6 that a gender gap can exist in the form of a significant difference between men and women with regard to political issues, but is often most pronounced in voting behaviour. It is traditionally argued, in relation to the gender gap, that men often take more of an interest in politics than women. However, the high turnout of women in the 1994 election challenges this thesis. While the significance of the liberation election accounted largely for the enthusiasm and interest, the enormous efforts of voter educators arguably also contributed to the high turnout.

Voter educators worked throughout the country in what has been described as a ‘large scale pedagogical undertaking that was probably the most massive national educational communications campaign of all time’ (Rebehn 1999). In both the 1994 national elections, and the 1995 local government elections, a large part of state expenditure (and donor funding) was devoted to voter education. Comparatively this is not unusual when states move towards democratisation, voter education is a necessary expenditure as the electorate is often unfamiliar with the process of multi-party elections (CORE 1994, 12). Within the education drive in 1994, various programmes were developed for different target groups, including programmes that focused on educating women for democracy and electoral participation.

This chapter aims to show what was needed, and the factors that determined the successful democratic process of mobilising and educating all South Africans, despite substantive differences in race, gender and class. It will examine the efforts and effects of the voter education drive, with a particular emphasis on the education directed at women voters.

**WHY VOTER EDUCATION?**

The freedom of citizens to choose their elected representatives is a critical feature of democratic governance. During an election citizens need to be informed of their rights and the voting process, as Dundas argues: ‘Political consciousness and informed choices are key factors in an electoral democracy’ (Dundas 1996, 168). For voters to participate effectively in the electoral process, they need to be familiar with the requirements of registration and voting and balloting procedures as well as aspects such as party choice and preference.
The apartheid policies of the National Party, which divided the country into a number of self-governing territories, ensured that South Africans of different race and ethnic groupings were separated. White men and women had been accustomed to voting in national elections since 1910 and 1930 respectively, although in a constituency based ‘winner takes all’ system. A minority of coloureds and Indians had had some limited experience in voting for the Tricameral Parliament since 1983, also in a constituency based system. The list proportional representation (PR) system used in 1994, as well as the new structure of national and provincial government, was therefore new to white, coloured and Indian voters. However, even more critical was the fact that the majority of black voters, many of them illiterate, had had no previous experience in voting, with the exception of the small number of Africans who voted in ‘homeland’ elections. The election was therefore the first time that all South Africans could take part in a unifying democratic process. Voter education therefore became a key task. Singh explains the importance of voter education succinctly:

The intensive and extensive work amongst voters was the real building of democracy. For the first time, all South Africans were informed of their choices and given the opportunity to go out and make their choice. Mass voter education was instrumental in setting the climate for democratic participation. (Singh, 1996, 7)

South Africa’s liberation struggle had been characterised by cycles of violence and conflict that inevitably caused fears and scepticism about the electoral process. Establishing a culture of non-violence and conflict resolution through the ballot box was pivotal to the process of democratic consolidation and nation building. Rebehn argues that the voter education campaign prior to the election therefore contained trust building measures as well as teaching the basics of democracy and electoral procedure. He describes the period that led up to the election as ‘a social education process that had as its aim on the one hand the electoral participation and electoral competence of all South Africa, and on the other attempted to create trust in the system as such’ (Rebehn 1999, 17).
Opinion polls conducted and research undertaken prior to the election indicated that a number of factors influenced voter participation, including voter literacy, fear of intimidation and political violence, ignorance of the electoral process, and scepticism about the secrecy of the vote. A nationwide survey conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) revealed that the two major obstacles confronting black voters were low levels of voter literacy and violence and intimidation (De Kock and Ehlers 1994, 71). Explaining the secrecy of the ballot proved to be a critical area of focus for voter educators, as large numbers of people thought that ‘the community will know how I vote’ (Johnson and Schlemmer 1996, 98). Schlemmer argued that perhaps the most discouraging find of a pre-election poll conducted by Markdata in 1993 was that only ‘some one-quarter of African, Indian and coloured voters had faith in the secret ballot. Among whites, only about one-half of voters seemed to feel certain that their choices will remain a secret’ (Giliomee, Schlemmer and Hauptfleisch 1994, 155). It was therefore apparent that voter education had to achieve a number of key tasks, including educating the electorate about the electoral process, motivating them to participate, and convincing them of the secrecy of the vote (Gilder 1994, 211).

ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY

Ahead of the 1994 elections, the status of women was a central concern to political parties and voter education organisations. The elections were an important step in consolidating the gains South African women had secured in the multiparty negotiation process leading to the finalisation of the Interim Constitution under which the elections were contested. Because the structures and institutions of apartheid had subjected women to unequal opportunities with men, it was critical that they should participate in the new government structures, most notably the GNU. A successful transition to democratic rule required the participation of all South Africans eligible to vote, regardless of gender, race or ethnicity.

As women constituted more than half the estimated 22.7 million voters used by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in its planning it was critical that they participate in the first democratic elections. They were not aware of their political rights, nor that their vote could make a
difference. According to former Women’s National Coalition convenor, Frene Ginwala, ‘it is important for women to vote because it will not be enough for us if the only change we get after the election is black men replacing white men in government. Political parties should start spelling out what they have to offer women, why women should vote for them … We will still have to push, but voting is a major step’ (Mojola 1994). ANC candidate Nozizwe Madlala reiterated this point when she stated that: ‘When choosing their party, women should not only look at the party election manifests…. We should ask how many women are on the party’s list and how committed the party is to upholding women’s interests’ (Madlala 1994, 8).

However, being granted the right to vote meant different things to different people, and it did not necessarily guarantee the majority of women effective political representation. ‘Indeed, many women themselves [did] not believe that the mere fact of having a vote will make them effective democratic citizens of the new South Africa’ (Levy 1993, 40). Women who are continually subordinated to men or are financially dependent on their husbands will possibly view voting as a largely ineffectual activity. Therefore, one important challenge was for voter educators to explain the individual rights of men and women, and convey the message that elections are a vital way of moving towards gender equality. By providing voter education to women the process of women’s empowerment was advanced. Voter education was a valuable means of explaining that ‘the process of exercising citizenship – and accompanying empowerment – only starts with the acquisition of an effective right to vote’ (Levy 1993, 42).

This was particularly so for rural women, who were among the most ignored and oppressed sector of society. For ANC candidate Mamlydia Kompe, the 1994 elections brought with them new hopes for changing the position of women (Ballington 1999, 3). Voter educators also needed to take cognisance of the fact that women were often less accessible and less educated than men:

Especially in rural areas they (women) often cannot make use of written voting instructions and are more likely to respond to verbal political appeals. Many will be subject to the authority not only of husband or father, but also of boss, farmer
and traditional leader. They will also be bound to the home and the workplace by daily duties and responsibilities of domestic service, the needs of their own children and homes, and the demands of factory or farm labour. (Ballington 1999, 40)

**CONDUCTING VOTER EDUCATION**

In the early 1990s, a number of organisations representing civil society were committed to democracy and education initiatives. Key among these was the Matla Trust, formed in 1991 to support organisations such as churches and civic councils, and to undertake developmental and educational projects. It developed a Community and Citizen Education Programme which ran voter education initiatives through various means including theatre groups performing voter education plays (Rebehn 1999, 91). Other organisations that conducted voter education were the South African Council of Churches, the Institute for Multi-Party Democracy, Project Vote, Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa (IDASA), and the Black Sash, as well as smaller organisations working in specific areas.

In an attempt to avoid duplication of programmes, the Independent Forum for Electoral Education (IFEE) was founded in early 1993 and run by Barry Gilder. The organisation integrated nearly half the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in public voter education. It represented a merger between 33 NGOs, churches, and civil society organisations, and aimed to implement a ‘co-ordinated and nationwide electoral preparation programme’ (Rebehn 1999, 94) by sharing resources to cover areas lacking in voter education. Membership of the forum was voluntary and members were required to commit themselves to a code of conduct which stressed support for genuine democracy and non-partisan electoral education (Gilder, 1994, 214). Similarly, the Democracy Education Broadcast Initiative (DEBI), also formed in 1993, co-ordinated voter education programmes on radio and television. DEBI consisted of 51 NGOs, as well as two-thirds of the membership of IFEE. The main tasks of IFEE were to educate voters about democracy; explain the secrecy of the ballot, appeal for political tolerance, and motivate citizens to vote (Rebehn
Ultimately it aimed to ‘capture the attention of the South African electorate though serious voter education mixed with entertainment’ (Rebehn 1999, 118).

Two months before the elections enormous effort was made to inform citizens about the mechanics of voting and about their democratic rights and responsibilities. Most NGOs, political parties, and civil society organisations developed their own creative approaches to education depending on their target audiences. A ‘great variety of material was produced of a standard that could never have been achieved by a government or single party’ (Rebehn 1999, 89). A survey undertaken in 1993 and 1994 highlighted the needs of the African electorate with regard to voter education. It found that ‘the concerns of potential voters in South Africa fall into three main areas: The broad needs of voters, such as the need for voting literacy, ID documents, etc; the broad fears of voters including the fear of violence, lack of secrecy etc; and the specific needs of those who say they are unsure whether they will vote or not, or who won’t vote’ (Rebehn 1999, 104-105). There were two main areas of voter education activity, namely training and a media strategy.

The secrecy of the vote was perhaps the most important voter education message, followed by freedom to vote for the party of one’s choice. All voter education programmes stressed this. For example, the Let’s Vote! Education manual stated ‘Remember: Your vote is a secret. Nobody will know who you vote for. Nobody can see who you vote for. You can vote for any party you want. If people ask you who you are going to vote for, you do not have to tell them’ (Moller & Hanf 1995, 25). IDASA also identified four messages that needed to be conveyed to the electorate: ‘Your vote is important – Your vote is secret – You can vote – You can trust and accept the result’ (Gilder 1994, 210). This emphasis on the privacy and secrecy of the ballot as an individual act ran counter in many ways to the practices of African political processes such as the kgotla, where decisions are made by consensus and in public. For people in rural areas, or members of trade unions, voting by show of hands was a familiar experience.

IDASA also identified as critical the need for a clear understanding of the relationship between voting and the elected government. Voters were instructed about which identity documents were valid for voting, how to put a mark next to the party of their choice on the ballot paper,
and about the difference between the ballot papers for the National Assembly and the provincial legislatures. In violence-torn regions like KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape it was also important to emphasise the security and safety of the ballot. Fears of rigging were widespread, and there was little confidence in the neutrality of the police. The presence of a large contingent of international and domestic observers was necessary for the credibility of a free and fair election.

The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) was also involved in electoral education, but somewhat later in the process than other organisations. By the time the IEC started work in January 1994 more than 120 organisations, most of them considered well developed and non-partisan, were already conducting education. Rather than duplicate these efforts the IEC opted to strengthen the organisations logistically and financially (Smith 1997, 88). It assumed the task of accrediting voter education programmes and invited organisations to apply for accreditation. Education programmes were required to be non-partisan and support democratic principles and values; to cover the mechanisms and structures of the voting process; to emphasise the secrecy of the ballot; to address post-election expectations; and to have clear objectives and be simple to comprehend (IEC 1994, 46). In all 108 education programmes were accredited. Another ten leading organisations were contracted and funded by the IEC to close gaps identified in voter education.

The IEC expected voter education programmes to ensure that historically disadvantaged groups were informed of their political rights, with the aim of efficient participation in the polling station and a reduction of spoilt ballot papers.

Naturally, a programme of this nature should be apolitical, professional, simple, affordable, but also one which integrates voter information with civic education. It should satisfy various audience groups: from the first time hesitant voter, to the cynical voter to the disadvantaged voter, rural voters, members of the security forces, reluctant employers such as farmers who may not provide time off to their staff or allow them to stand for elections. A clear strategy of how to begin the educative process, assessing absorption of messages and
peaking the campaign at various stages, should be devised.

(CORE, 12-13)

The IEC acknowledged the huge challenge presented by a country the size of South Africa and was aware that NGOs would not be able to reach all corners of the country. Gilder noted that as the majority of voters in rural areas were illiterate or semi-literate, the ‘logistics of reaching a significant percentage of these people with a substantial education campaign [was] daunting and extremely expensive’ (Gilder 1994, 210). As a result, the IEC’s voter education division became increasingly involved in training voter education trainers, and special projects were launched to reach target groups not adequately covered (IEC 1994, 89).

Weeks before the election it became apparent to the IEC and to voter education organisations that concerted efforts needed to be made to significantly increase the voting skills of certain target groups. Among the special projects the IEC implemented was a schools project where a number of students of voting age received voter education aimed at increasing their motivation to vote. A campaign, entitled Operation Access, was designed to counteract the effects of ‘no-go areas’ and promote an atmosphere of open debate in areas afflicted with conflict and violence (IEC 1994, 89).

If voter education was to have maximum impact, necessary information had to be packaged and directed to different target groups. One of these was women. No nation-wide co-ordinated campaign targeted women voters, rather education initiatives were dependent on the individual efforts of organisations that identified women as a constituency with special needs. These organisations included the IEC, the Independent Mediation Service of South Africa (IMSSA), whose Elections and Balloting Project department played a major role, and the Black Sash. An important initiative was the establishment by the IEC of a Women’s Desk which worked together with a number of organisations (IEC 1994, 90). IMSSA’s Elections and Balloting project developed a programme aimed primarily at training educators from rural areas to work in their own areas. The organisation emphasised the inclusion of women trainers in its programmes. It is reported that a number of women were empowered by the training they received, and it was encouraging to have women imparting information which had historically fallen into the male domain (IMSSA 1994, 27).
The IEC also worked in co-operation with DEBI as part of a publicity drive that employed print and electronic media, enabling a large number of citizens to receive voter information. Both radio and television were critical, with radio reaching a larger proportion of black voters and television reaching a larger number of coloured, Indian, and white voters. An important focus of DEBI was to reach women in rural communities. As Shirley Smith explained:

DEBI gave priority to previously disenfranchised citizens and in particular targeted women, young people and rural communities … Programmes on voter education were carried on seventeen radio stations in each of the country’s eleven languages … In all, approximately seventeen million pamphlets, leaflets and posters were distributed, including seven million sample ballot papers in full colour, as were videos, newspaper advertisements, teaching guides and manuals. (Smith, 90, emphasis added)

Further, as part of DEBI’s media strategy, various documentary films were produced to target groups that required special motivation and information ahead of the election. A film was produced portraying women in rural areas and highlighting the problems they faced and ways in which they could organise voter education workshops in their areas. The film included interviews with leading figures in rural women’s movements, and focused on the fears, hopes, and expectations of rural women. As many rural women did not have access to television, the documentary was widely disseminated by means of mobile video units (Rebehn 1999, 128).

While most of the content and focus areas of the programmes that targeted women voters were similar to the others used by IFEE affiliated organisations (most IFEE programmes stressed that women should vote), there were often problems in terms of access that necessitated targeting women as a separate constituency. This was particularly so for women in rural areas as many had traditionally played a minimal role in community meetings and their participation was limited either by formal prohibitions or by male domination. Wixley explained that ‘their excessive work burden – including collecting firewood and water, childcare and … tending to livestock – seldom [left] women any time to attend workshops or meetings.'
Even if a woman is willing and able to participate, the chief retains a power of veto: if he does not give the go ahead for voter education, it does not happen’ (Wixley 1994, 13). Illiteracy was a further complicating factor for rural women, which often meant that they were ill informed about the electoral process, political parties and structures like the Government of National Unity. ‘Voter educators find themselves hard-pressed to convince women who have experienced homeland elections that the April 27 vote will be different’ (Wixley 1994, 13).

The Black Sash was another organisation that aimed to reach women voters, particularly in rural areas. While the organisation was formed in 1955 to give humanitarian and legal aid to those oppressed by apartheid, the rights of women was one of its major aims. ‘After decades of support for human rights and democracy, the organisation entered the voter education campaign with workshops and materials aimed especially at women in rural areas and townships’ (Rebehn 1999, 90). National co-ordinator of voter education, Gille de Vlieg, acknowledged that it was extremely difficult to break down the barrier ‘between men who see they have the right to ask the questions, and women who feel they have to take a backseat in politics’ (Wixley 1994, 13). Black Sash therefore trained women from the Rural Women’s Movement (which was a community based organisation tackling issues of land, gender and development) and university students to run voter education programmes in their own communities, as this encouraged women to take part in the training sessions. De Vlieg noted the importance of women trainers in rural areas:

The patriarchal structure of our society makes women feel intimidated. Feedback from our trainers is that the biggest problem to be overcome is male domination, which sometimes results in women being denied access to some areas. Chiefs are suspicious of women entering their areas and educating women about voting. A lot of voter education is done by males and we believe that it is very important for women to be educated by other women. (Mojola 1994)

As men were also often disruptive, the Black Sash ran separate workshops for women which encouraged them to speak up and discuss what they
wanted. The workshops concentrated on ‘dispelling the widespread fears about the voting process, by staging voting exercises … We speak a lot about intimidation – not only about political intimidation but intimidation of women by men. We emphasise that women must vote for whoever they want, not just who their husband, father, uncle or brother tells them’ (Wixley 1994, 13). While the efforts of the Black Sash were not large scale compared with those of other organisations, they nevertheless represented the recognition of the special needs of rural women in the run-up to their first voting experience.

Ntomb’futhi Zondo, organiser for the Education for Democracy campaign, argued that only a limited effort had been made to reach out to women in rural areas. For Zondo, a critical task when educating women in rural areas was to develop a way of dealing with intimidation and to create an understanding that when it comes to elections women must make their own decisions about who to vote for:

The reality is that most women, especially in rural areas (where the majority are) are not aware of their legal rights. Further, in some cases, discrimination seems to be officially sanctioned … When speaking to women about women’s participation in political affairs, they can’t understand what you’re talking about. (Zondo 1995, 58)

In her voter education programmes she emphasised that voting was both a right and a responsibility. Other issues she considered important included explaining to women that their husbands and employers would not know how they had voted; convincing women that they had a leadership role to play; and teaching them how to pressurise government to ensure it initiates an enabling atmosphere for women to establish themselves (Zondo 1995, 60).

The Women’s Development Foundation (WDF) moved beyond other voter education programmes by acknowledging from the outset that women were encouraged to vote in elections, but with no guarantee that they would be included in leadership. WDF programmes therefore encouraged women to read party manifestos and policies on gender equality and vote for a party with policies that addressed their special needs. As part of its strategy,
WDF produced pamphlets in all eleven official languages, conducted radio and television interviews, and developed cassette messages to be played in taxis – a common form of transport for the black population. Videos were also produced to accompany training materials at voter education workshops (Watson 2000, 3). A similar message was to be found in Speak, a publication which produced election and education supplements. One message carried by Speak stated: ‘If women stand up and clearly state their demands, they can force parties to adopt policies which will meet some of their needs … Women have the advantage of being one of the biggest groups of voters in the country. As long as women are well organised and united, they stand a good chance of realising some of their goals’ (‘Voter Education’. Speak, May 1994, 24).

The large number of education programmes meant that millions of voters were reached. Separate workshops for women proved to be useful and necessary although few programmes identified the correlation between the women’s vote and an improvement in the lives of women, or what democracy means to women in the broader sense beyond the exercise of the franchise. Overall, a mammoth effort went into preparing South Africa’s electorate for the polls, but unsystematic attention was paid to the position of women in the emerging democratic order.

POLITICAL PARTY ACTIVITIES

It was in the interest of political parties to conduct voter education to ensure that their supporters went to the polls on election day and voted correctly. Therefore the voter education conducted by political parties was clearly partisan as the majority of the twenty-six parties that appeared on the 1994 ballot paper had never contested an election. The National Party and Democratic Party, with their history of participation in previous elections, had election machinery and the skills to run an effective campaign. However, the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) had never taken part in elections. This proved a major challenge for parties, as Roshene Singh explains:

The ANC and PAC had previously operated as liberation movements with the capacity to mobilise around specific issues
but their support had never been tested though the ballot box. Their experience of mass organising was limited to mass action in the form of boycotts, marches, demonstrations and public rallies which did not reach more than ten per cent of the population. They did not have the organisational capacity to reach all voters. There, they had a massive task ahead to build their capacity and effectively reach millions of voters. (Singh 1996, 3-4)

Training was therefore necessary to transform the organisational culture of liberation movements to that of political parties ready to contest elections. The massive amount of training required by the ANC could not be conducted by one NGO. As a result, four NGOs formed a consortium called the Voter Education and Election Training Unit (VEETU) to conduct electoral training for a range of organisations involved in the electoral process. The members of the consortium worked in partnership around the country, and received donor funding. VEETU produced client specific manuals, general training and information manuals, and mass voter education materials (Singh, 1996, 44).

In line with its aim to increase the capacity of the ANC to fight an election campaign and provide voter education, it combined training for election management together with the training of voter educators (Singh, 1996, 5).

VEETU’s ANC voter education campaign had to take into account the attitudes of voters, their lack of information, and the inaccessibility of voters in certain areas (Singh, 31). Voter education training focused on informing voters how to vote and stressed the necessary documents that were needed in order to do so. It also aimed to mobilise voters on election day to ensure a high turnout (Singh, 34). Training was usually conducted in the language commonly spoken by participants, although most of the training manuals were in English. VEETU also used mock elections, which proved to be the most effective way to reach large numbers of people, and were effective in demonstrating the voting process. The constituency groups targeted were in rural villages, squatter settlements, hostels, farms, and rural towns and urban townships (Singh, 38). In the year leading up to April 1994 VEETU reached 50 000 people (Singh, 5).
In the middle of the campaigning phase it became evident that women were not participating as actively in election training and campaigns as men. Singh explains that the average attendance of women at VEETU workshops was between 30 and 40 per cent, which was a cause for concern (Singh, 41). As a result, a course for women activists was planned after discussions between the ANC Women’s League (ANCWL) and the ANC. Included in the course content was:

... an understanding of the position of women in South Africa and where women are organised. The participants planned special programmes to empower women to become involved in the elections and discussed women’s issues that needed to be put on the election agenda of political parties. (Singh, 41)

The ANCWL conducted voter education workshops in rural communities and townships where women were concentrated to ‘help get out the women’s vote’ (Oliver 1994, 8). It was recognised that if it was effectively to reach women across the political spectrum VEETU would have to move beyond the base of the ANC.

The need to develop a separate training programme for women was confirmed by the responses from the workshops which reported that women ‘felt more comfortable in a workshop not dominated by the input of men’ (Singh, 41). As ANC activist, Bongiwe Njobe commented: ‘Voter education is extremely important. We have to tell the women that your vote is independent of your husband’s … We tell them … your decision is yours. You are a person in your own right’ (Oliver 1994, 8).

Voter education not only informed women of the mechanics of voting but aided in confidence building in a land where the majority of women had been denied education. Njobe stressed that voter education for women triggered an awareness and confidence, thereby aiding in the empowerment of women seen as critical for the country’s future. As ‘women constitute the majority of the people in the rural areas … we want women to acquire skills so that when women get land, they know what to do with it’ (Oliver 1994, 8). Furthermore, the workshops gave women the opportunity to interact constructively with other organisations and groupings, creating a support network.
The ANC, with VEETU, was not the only party to target women. For Faith Gaza, then Chairperson of the Women’s League of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the issue of safety for women was a critical issue. The KwaZulu-Natal province, where IFP support was concentrated, was racked by pre-election violence and intimidation which resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency weeks before the election. In the months prior to the elections, the IFP resisted participation, and only decided to take part on 19 April, a week before the election date. The uncertainty of IFP participation left little time for the party to launch an election campaign or for voter education (Rebehn 1999, 115). However, between December 1993 and April 1994 IMSSA trained 1 350 IFP trainers to conduct voter education in a number of rural areas. In the time available IFP trainers held regular workshops and provided voter education to hundreds of IFP supporters (IMSSA report 1994, 19).

According to Moller and Hanf the ANC was viewed as the most active voter education organisation in most areas. Responses to a survey conducted after the elections indicate that 43 per cent of respondents had received voter information from a party, and of these 78 per cent were reached by the ANC, 10 per cent by the National Party, 5 per cent by the IFP, and 2 per cent by the Democratic Party. The other parties reached only a fraction of voters (Moller and Hanf, 13).

The ANC was also the only party effectively to identify women as a constituency. But Wixley states that despite ‘the ANC’s slick newspaper ads publicising their plan to improve the lives of women by “guaranteeing women the right to home and land ownership”, their American style roadshow has not been adapted for rural voters’ (Wixley 1994, 12). She argues that the ‘people’s forum’ (aimed at increasing grassroots participation) did not reach the people who were traditionally left at home while their men made decisions under the kgotla tree. This argument was reiterated by Mamlydia Kompe:

Very little is really happening … no political party is really taking the initiative to organise rural women and show them how to vote. We’ve heard about a mobile education van; we haven’t seen it. (Wixley 1994, 12)
Watson believes that political parties focused on women merely as a vote bank. ‘An overall conclusion around the extent to which special attention was given to women as voters during the elections is that, to a large extent, women were encouraged to vote so that a party could win. There was very little time and attention given to women’s rights through voting. Women’s rights [and] interests were subsumed by the national interest’ (Watson 2000, 3-4). For gender activists, South Africa’s first democratic election was pivotal to the liberation of women. The fact that political parties did not take this into account in their electioneering and education strategies created a critical issue around which women could mobilise. The lack of gender awareness of many political parties even prompted the formation of two women’s parties ahead of the 1994 elections.

Overall, voter education was regarded as a huge success. The low number of spoilt ballot papers – less than 1% – indicated that most voters had mastered the voting process. According to Moller and Hanf, results of a post-election survey indicated that as many as nine in ten voters were reached by the media and a wide range of face-to-face voter education programmes before the election. Younger and better educated first time voters gained easier access to all programmes, and information in the form of comic books was popular. Nearly half of first time voters received education, most notably from the IEC and the ANC, along with other political parties, organisations, and trade unions. Smith of the IEC maintains that: ‘There can be no doubt that, without voter education, the majority of South African citizens would have effectively been disempowered from exercising an informed choice in the election process’ (Smith, 88).

The Moller and Hanf surveys also indicated that black voters were adamant that voter education was essential: ‘87 per cent stated that without this information they would not have voted correctly’ (Moller and Hanf, 20). It is reported that up to three-quarters of voters received education in their home language. Voter education messages were perceived to be both salient and easy to understand, and messages concerning democratic principles were regarded as being as important as those concerning voting skills. The Moller and Hanf survey suggests that ‘the majority [of voters] felt confident of their new voting skills and that their vote was in secret. Most voters indicated that they had voted of their own free will for the party of their choice’ (Moller and Hanf, Synopsis).
Notwithstanding the importance of the high turnout and low number of spoilt ballots, problems hampered voter education in some areas. The sheer number of first time voters made it impossible to provide direct education, and it appeared that most voters relied on other sources for information. One analysis suggested that only about 20 per cent had received direct voter education, with most voters relying on the mass media (Friedman and Stack, 319). Singh points out that ANC education efforts were sometimes hampered because remote rural areas were difficult to reach, and in some areas chiefs prevented free political activity. This often had a direct impact on the education of women in remote areas. Illiteracy was a further problem, with up to 50 per cent of the black population estimated to be illiterate (Singh 28-29). Some voter education programmes were criticised for ‘the stereotyping of women in their classic roles as teachers, nurses and domestic servants’ (Moller and Hanf, 265).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS: 1995 AND 1996

South Africans went to the polls again just over a year after the 1994 elections, this time to vote for an ‘interim’ phase of local government with democratically elected councils. The apartheid regime had created exclusionary black and white councils at the local level, which came to an end with first phase of the transition in 1994, creating temporary municipal councils consisting of representatives from black and white communities. In 1995-96 differentiated categories of elected local government were created for metropolitan, urban and rural areas, with different power structures and functions depending on the area in question. The interim phase of local government was based on elected councillors occupying positions in this range of structures (Pottie 1999). These elected structures remained in place until the 2000 local elections when non-racial and democratic local councils were elected. Most provinces held elections on 1 November 1995, but the KwaZulu-Natal Province and metropolitan Cape Town elections were delayed until May 1996 because of disputes over demarcation and irregularities in the registration process.

As the sphere of government directly responsive to communities and responsible for the provision of services, local government is the area of government closest to the people and is fundamental to the consolidation
of democracy. Central to effective local government is ‘an electorate that brings out its vote in an informed manner [which] must be kept alive by citizens who hold their representatives accountable …’ (Bam 2000, 4). Local government is of special importance to the lives of women as they are primarily responsible for family well-being and community care. Effective municipal service delivery not only makes women’s lives easier (particularly in rural areas) it can also contribute to greater gender equality in the community (Van Donk 2000, 13). It was therefore important that women should be elected to local government structures. As one candidate stated ahead of the election:

… women are better equipped than men for leadership of local authorities. Local government deals with local issues … I believe it is women out there who know exactly what they want. Women know what childcare facilities are needed … [and] stand in long queues for hospitals and for paying rates … All these services affect women more than any other person.

(Badat 1995, 22)

Voter education was again an important task in the run up to the local elections. While there were some similarities to the 1994 elections, there were numerous differences that needed to be communicated to the electorate. Among the issues which needed explanation was the need for second elections so soon after the national and provincial elections. Voters also had to be acquainted with the roles and functions of local government structures: ‘Developing voters’ understanding of local government models, powers and responsibilities in 1995/6 was a more complex task than that required regarding national and provincial governments in 1994’ (Camay and Gordon 1996,108). At a practical level, the 1995/96 elections were far more complicated than the 1994 elections. Voters were required to register, a new concept for the majority of the population. Balloting and electoral systems were different, with voters required to vote for a candidate of their choice (ward vote) as well as for the party of their choice (proportional vote). After the 1994 elections many of the organisations that had provided voter education were forced by a lack of funding to abandon their education initiatives. The momentum created by the national elections, therefore,
did not carry over to the local elections. Ongoing education about the rights and responsibilities of South Africans was not prioritised, and it was as though ‘…the April 1994 election was seen by many as completion of the political transformation, rather than the beginning of a new era in which democracy had to be truly entrenched in South African society’ (Camay and Gordon 1996, 105). As a consequence, the education infrastructure developed for the 1994 elections had largely disappeared and a shortage of funding hampered education efforts.

While the 1994 elections were centrally administered through the IEC, the administration of the local government elections was decentralised, with local authorities carrying the responsibility for conducting them. As a result, voter education was also decentralised and not as well organised or co-ordinated as it had been in 1994 (Camay and Gordon 1996, 108). Although the national Elections Task Group’s (ETG) Communication and Voter Education Task Team had a mandate to co-ordinate voter education activities, it did not develop an effective detailed national strategy. As a result, some areas received no voter education, while in others several programmes ran concurrently (Camay and Gordon 1996, 127).

Most programmes only began in early 1995 when voter registration started. A number of organisations, including local authorities and the NGO community, were involved in providing education. Among the NGOs were Idasa, IMSSA, the Matla Trust, Project Vote, and the South African Council of Churches. The content of the programmes varied greatly and included information on registration, the importance of the vote, the significance of local government, demarcation, the voting process, and ways of holding councillors accountable. As election regulations changed throughout the process, voter education materials had to be changed accordingly.

Many of those who worked as educators believe the process began too late, and the electorate did not receive much of the election information and education in time to absorb and utilise it effectively. One reason for this was that provincial personnel were appointed late, another that there was a delay in the receipt of funding allocations. Despite the range of organisations involved, few programmes were directed at women or identified women as a category with certain needs. Julie Oyegun believes voter education before the local elections would have benefited women if it had recognised:
... the unequal reality of women’s gender experience of the state and should suggest strategies to re-design programmes in order to enhance actual programme delivery for women. Women must be well equipped to actively participate in the ... elections and to fully recognise the power of their votes. Women should also be informed on which candidates will represent their interests within the structures of local government... Women must not be instructed just to vote. They must gain a fresh appreciation of the power of their voters as a force for change in the gender status quo. (Oyegun 1995, 4)

Camay and Gordon, note that ‘Women’s organisations felt that election education should have been targeted to women’s needs, including training women educators and involving women’s organisations in the development of materials’ (Camay and Gordon 1996, 134). The impact of this absence of training was seen in the fact that women appear to have participated less in the local elections than in the previous national and provincial elections (Camay and Gordon 1996, 248). It also emerged that many women faced similar obstacles to those they had faced in 1994. For example, there was similar stereotyping of women in politics, particularly in the media, and many women felt pressured not to cast their votes:

Rural women, in particular, feared intimidation which caused some not to cast their votes, and certainly not to contest the elections as candidates. Some awaited consultation with their migrant worker husbands. Given the known high rates of female illiteracy, not enough provision was made for oral transmission of important election information. (Camay and Gordon 1996, 248)

Furthermore, Camay and Gordon note that the majority of participants at empowerment workshops prior to the elections were men; that women were often marginalised and had family responsibilities; and that many women felt threatened if they demanded their rightful role in politics (Camay and Gordon 1996, 248). Zondo also noted that rural women were often confused
about the local elections, some viewing them as ‘another step towards getting more men in government or reaffirming their … positions in rural communities’. Given that similar obstacles were prevalent in the 1994 elections, lessons learnt would have pointed to the need for gender-specific training. Because of the limited funding available, together with the short time frames and absence of co-ordination of education activities on a par with 1994, it appears that gender-specific training was not prioritised.

It was not only the participation of women as voters that was limited by a lack of education, the participation of women as elected representatives was too. Many women who were actively involved in politics did not receive support from their families and communities or from other women. This clearly impacted on their role:

There was some evidence that the leadership of many women’s organisations were ill-informed and uninvolved, with little detailed knowledge of the election management structures and processes. Their disappointing participation in those structures pointed to a general absence of gender awareness in the way the election was planned and executed. (Camay and Gordon 1996, 248)

In order for women to participate effectively at the local level in the future, there is clearly a need for voter education that targets women as a particular constituency with special needs. As local government is the sphere of government that potentially has the greatest impact on the daily lives of women, particularly in rural areas, women need to be encouraged to participate in local government elections. Not only should education seek to encourage effective participation during elections, it should also seek to raise awareness about the benefits of continued interest in local issues between elections.

**DWINDLING VOTER EDUCATION IN ELECTORAL PREPARATION**

The enormous effort and money committed to voter education in 1994 has been absent from subsequent elections. This was particularly apparent during
the 1999 national and provincial elections when, although a number of organisations were involved in voter education, there was clearly a decline in funding, co-ordination and international interest. There was limited funding available to NGOs for voter education, particularly from foreign donors who had contributed significantly in the 1994 elections. The late announcement of the 1999 election date and new requirements for voting created new challenges (Watson, 8). It was also apparent that women’s organisations and educators were not well prepared or co-ordinated.

The main difference between the 1994 and 1999 national and provincial elections was that in 1999 a national common voters’ roll, different from that prepared for the local elections in 1995/6, had to be compiled. The franchise was confined to South African citizens in possession of an identity document or temporary certificate, who had to apply for registration in the voting district in which they ordinarily resided. The result was that the task of informing citizens of the requirements and venues for registration proved to be a critical challenge in the administration of the 1999 elections. Of the 22.8 million estimated voters, more than 18.3 million (80.4%) registered. Women constituted 53 per cent of the voters’ register.

The IEC and NGOs embarked on a number of public awareness campaigns to inform voters of registration and polling processes. After the compilation of the voters’ roll, it became apparent that voter educators had to focus not only on providing information on the mechanics of balloting, but also had to encourage citizens to vote after opinion polls pointed to an increasing apathy towards the election. The Election Act of 1998 stipulates that voter education is one of the responsibilities of the Electoral Commission. However, the responsibility is not confined to the IEC, as historically NGOs have played an important role in this regard (EISA 1999, 13).

The limited financial resources of the IEC ahead of the elections meant the allocation to voter education was much less that had originally been intended. The IEC therefore made provision to assist NGOs involved in voter education on condition that they met with its accreditation requirements. The prerequisites included non-partisan course content and adherence to a Code of Conduct publicised by the Commission in 1998 (EISA 1999, 13).
A number of NGOs were involved in providing voter education nationally. EISA was one of them. It initiated a voter registration and information campaign, distributing 100 000 voter education posters, mainly through the IEC, and published a voter education pamphlet, as well as providing extensive voter education training (EISA 1999). Other organisations included the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), Co-operative for Research and Education (CORE), and other NGOs working at the provincial level, as well as community outreach programmes. Voter education courses typically focused on the registration process, the mechanics of polling, the secrecy of the ballot, and the importance of voting as a key component of exercising one’s democratic rights and consolidating democracy. Another important message was that only voters who had registered would be able to vote. Political parties also compiled their own voter education programmes.

Few NGOs targeted women in their campaigns. However, the Women’s Development Foundation embarked on a voter education for registration campaign, aimed particularly at women in rural areas (Watson, 9). The programme was designed to encourage women to acquire the requisite identity document, register, and vote on polling day. EISA also targeted its voter education campaign at women in rural areas.

After the 1999 elections, the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) conducted a gender analysis of five sets of material used for voter education (EISA, IDASA, CORE, IEC and SACSOC). The analysis included an examination of how awareness was raised about the right to vote, the voting process, whether there was a specific focus on the unequal power relations between women and men, and the extent to which materials used examples of gender sensitive problems (Mbere 1999, 34). While the courses were found to be wanting in gender sensitivity in some areas, most of the activities targeted women. The IEC booklet raised gender awareness in a chapter on ‘Women in Society’.

It is estimated that more than 7 000 women were reached through these five programmes. However, an important finding of the analysis is that most organisations commenced their education in 1999, which hampered efforts to reach rural voters – the group that requires the most information about aspects of the electoral system, registration, and voting. ‘A majority of women live in rural areas, and even though statistics indicate
that 65%-70% of women have registered, many of those not reached may [have been] rural dwellers’ (Mbere 1999, 38).

While there was a decline in the scope of voter education compared with previous elections, there were a number of important initiatives aimed at raising voter awareness of the election. EISA produced a bi-monthly publication, Election Talk, which provided up-to-date information on a range of issues including political party developments, the progress of the IEC, and registration trends. It also sought to raise gender issues by providing articles on the political party manifestos and the number of women forwarded by political parties for election. Another important initiative was the Election Bulletin newsletter produced by Women’sNet, an information-clearing house that seeks to empower women through the use of information communication technology. The newsletter contained a wide range of articles on issues related to women’s participation in the electoral process, and encouraged women to vote and have their say in the democratic process.

CONCLUSION

South Africa’s successful transition from white minority domination to an inclusive democracy culminated in the first all race elections in May 1994. Key to the success of the elections was the ability of South Africans, most whom had previously been denied the franchise, to participate confidently in the electoral process. Voter education was fundamental in ensuring democratic participation and in transmitting key messages.

The status and participation of women was a central issue ahead of the 1994 elections. Women had made some gains in the negotiation process leading up to the elections and it was critical that these gains be consolidated by their participation and representation in the new democratic dispensation. It is evident that the enormous voter education ahead of the election was a huge success, and was central to ensuring a high turnout at the polls and creating an environment for the participation of all South Africans in the new democratic dispensation.

The decline in turnout in both the 1995-6 local elections and the 1999 national and provincial elections demonstrates the need for continued education. Women must be equipped with the knowledge to ensure their
full participation in democratic and electoral processes and to appreciate the force of their votes as a means of improving their present position. Until all women are electorally and politically aware, intimidation, stereotyping and marginalisation, particularly among rural women, may continue to cloud their participation in the process. In order for all women to participate effectively, voter education that targets them as a particular constituency with special needs, should be considered.

NOTES

1. As Singh explains, the four NGOs were the Education and Information Project, HAP Organisational Development Services, the Centre for Community and Labour Studies, and Co-operative Planning.