2026 Local Government Elections

Measuring Voter Satisfaction and Electoral Integrity

Results from the Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2026



Briefing Report

HSRC
Human Sciences Research Council

06 November 2026

IEC
SOUTH AFRICA

2026 Local Government Elections:
Measuring Voter Satisfaction and Electoral Integrity

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Report Prepared for

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INTRODUCTION

On the 4th of November 2026, the seventh Local Government Elections (LGE) in South Africa took place. The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) was commissioned by the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) to conduct a survey on the day of the elections. The intention of the survey, known as the Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS), was to establish the opinions and perceptions of voters on election day, understanding the electoral experience of ordinary voters. In the ESS, voters were asked a series of questions about the election process, including whether the elections were free and fair. A further aim of the study was to assess the operational efficiency of the Commission in managing these elections.

The study was conducted among South Africans who voted in the 2026 LGE. This document will provide a short summary of the results of this survey. The data presented here is **preliminary** and a fuller report will be released in due course. However, based on the research team's interviews with voters on election day, we can conclude that the voting public was positive about the electoral integrity of the 2026 LGE. In addition, the voting public had a very positive appraisal of the Electoral Commission's management of the elections and the conduct of officials at voting stations. Based on this analysis, the HSRC confirms that these elections were free and fair and that the Commission performed exceedingly well in the implementation and management of the country's seventh LGE.

METHODOLOGY

The sample design included stratification and multi-stage sampling procedures. The sampling of the voting stations was done proportional to the Electoral Commission's distribution of registered voters and considered province, geographic type and the size of a voting station. This sample design was implemented to ensure that a nationally representative sample of voting stations was selected and that the results of the survey could be properly weighted to the population of eligible voters in the country. At the voting stations, fieldworkers used random sampling to select voters to ensure a fair representation in terms of gender, race, age and disability status. The ESS has been conducted during every major election in South Africa since the 1999 National and Provincial Election (NPE). The survey was designed so that the data collected in this round can be compared to past rounds of the ESS.

Table 1: Data collection realisation rate by province of voting station, 2026

	COMPLETE	REFUSED	TARGET	REALISED
Western Cape	1,397	239	1,550	90%
Eastern Cape	2,105	57	2,350	90%
Northern Cape	884	13	1,000	88%
Free State	1,066	46	1,300	82%
KwaZulu-Natal	2,154	148	2,450	88%
North West	1,057	85	1,400	76%
Gauteng	1,884	200	1,950	97%
Mpumalanga	1,154	111	1,200	96%
Limpopo	1,497	334	1,800	83%
TOTAL	13,198	1,233	15,000	88%

A sample of 300 voting stations countrywide was selected. The distribution of these voting stations and the resultant number of interviews at, and in the vicinity of, the stations were proportional to the Electoral Commission's distribution of registered voters. At each voting station, 50 voters were interviewed during the course of the day. These were divided into four time slots to ensure a fair spread of interviews over different times of the day, when dissimilar dynamics might have been in

operation. Fieldworkers completed interviews with 13,198 respondents in the sampled voting stations across the nine provinces with a realisation rate of 88% (Table 1). Lower than anticipated realisation rates were observed in the North West but these were still within acceptable levels.

VOTER SATISFACTION RESULTS

This section looks at the experiences of people casting their ballots at their voting station. It explores questions about when voters decided to participate in the 2026 LGE as well as voter perceptions of the ease of understanding voting procedures and the ballot papers and the time taken to vote. Overall, respondents reported accessible and straightforward voting procedures and substantially shorter queues than in the 2024 NPE.

Timing of decision on political choice

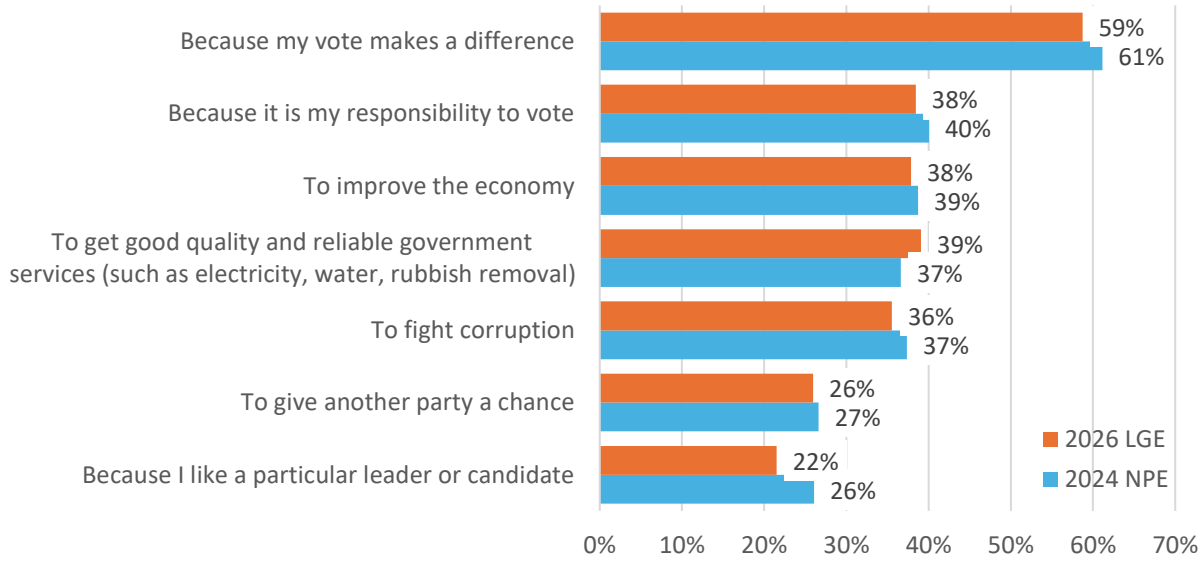
ESS survey participants were asked **when they decided** to participate in the current elections. A large proportion of voters reported that they had decided to participate long before the 2026 LGE. Three-fifths (60%) of respondents had decided to vote more than six months before Election Day. A further 20% decided one to six months beforehand, 12% in the preceding month, 5% in the final week and 4% on Election Day itself. These findings indicate that most participants had made their decision well in advance, although approximately one in five decided within the final month.

Reasons for voting

Respondents were also asked which factors had a major influence on their decision to vote. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, the most frequently cited motivation in both elections was the belief that one's vote makes a difference (internal political efficacy), mentioned by 59% of voters in the 2026 Local Government Elections (LGE). The civic duty to vote was mentioned 38% of voters. Other motivations in 2026 included the desire to secure good-quality and reliable government services (39%), improving the economy (38%) and fighting corruption (36%). By comparison, giving another political party a chance (26%) and support for a particular leader or candidate (22%) were less frequently cited.

Figure 1: Reasons for electoral participation, 2024 and 2026 (%)

Voter responses to the question: "Did ANY of the following reasons have a BIG influence on your decision to vote today? I voted… (Select all that apply)?"



Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2024, 2026

The pattern of voting motivations remained remarkably consistent between the 2024 and 2026 elections, with differences of no more than four percentage points across all seven reasons. These findings suggest that electoral participation continues to be motivated primarily by a combination of belief in the value of voting, civic responsibility and concerns about government performance, rather than allegiance to individual political leaders or candidates. The prominence of service delivery, economic improvement and anti-corruption considerations also highlights the importance of substantive governance issues in shaping voters' decisions to participate.

Perceived level of tolerance during campaign period

In spite of the highly contested nature of the political campaign, most voters felt that the political parties / independent candidates were tolerant of one another during campaigns for the 2026 LGE. When asked about the level of tolerance, 63% of voters said that the campaign period was very tolerant and 23% told fieldworkers that it was somewhat tolerant. Only a small share of voters (7%) reported that the campaign was not tolerant and 7% of the population said that they were uncertain about how to answer. The pattern of results is similar to what we see during the 2021 LGE and the 2016 LGE.

Political representatives outside voting stations

A total of 93% of respondents voted at stations with political party representatives present outside the perimeter of the station. About 40% of respondents said they had been approached before entering by a political party or independent candidate representative offering assistance or checking details.

Voting station accessibility

Respondents were queried on how accessible the voting station were for persons with disability and the elderly. Most voters evaluated the Commission favourably on this issue; 86% said that the station was easily accessible for these groups. Both disabled voters (55% very accessible, 31% accessible) and very elderly voters (58% very accessible, 29% accessible) rated the station as accessible.

Understanding voting procedures

Voters were asked about whether they thought the **procedures inside their voting stations** were easy or difficult to understand. We found that 58% of voters thought the procedures were 'very easy' to understand and 38% stated that they were 'easy'. Less than 1% described the procedures as 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to understand. This is consistent with past rounds of the ESS, suggesting that voters are easily able to navigate the procedures for voting at their station. Satisfaction with signage and printed instructions was also high (95% satisfied or very satisfied).

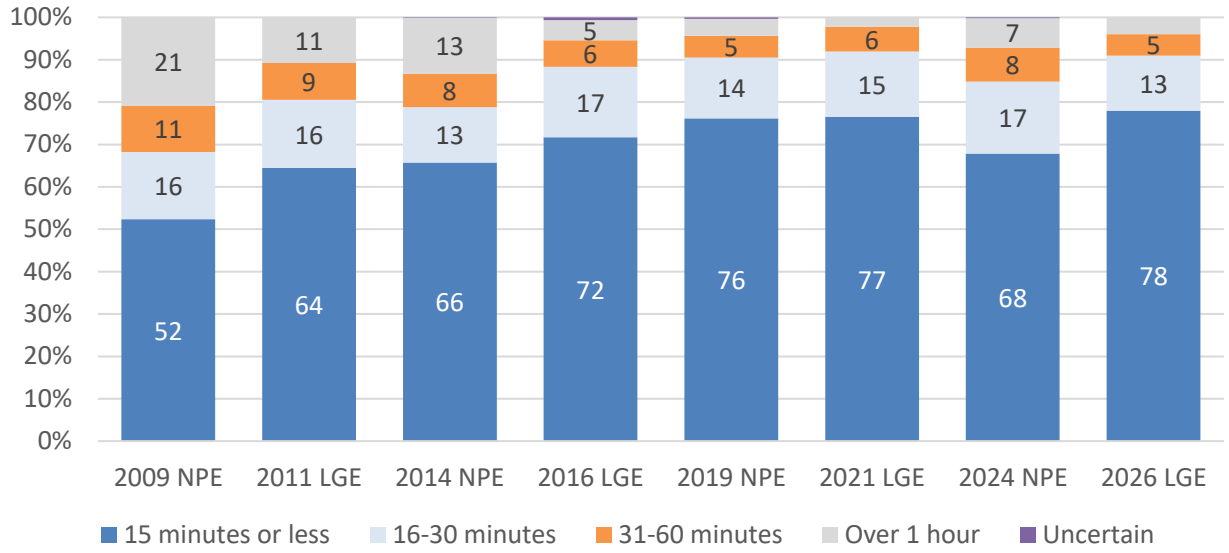
Time taken to vote

To allow for a comprehensive assessment of the time it took to vote, ESS respondents were asked about the average **time it took them to reach their station**. For the 2026 LGE, the majority (90%) of voters said that it took them about half an hour or less to reach their voting station, including 66% who travelled for no more than 15 minutes. The remainder either said that it took them between 30 and 60 minutes (8%) or over an hour (3%). This is an improvement over earlier major elections, especially the 2009 LGE, when average travel time was significantly higher.

Queue times were also short (**Figure 2**), with 78% queuing for no more than 15 minutes and 13% for 16-30 minutes. A total of 91% of voters queued for no longer than half an hour; and only 4% queued for more than an hour in 2026 LGE. Queuing performance improved substantially relative to the 2024 NPE. The share of voters that said that they had to wait 15 minutes or less in the station queue rose

from 60% in 2024 NPE to 78% in 2026 LGE. Moreover, the share who waited more than an hour fell from about 11% in 2024 NPE to 4% in 2026 LGE. These results represent a return to the comparatively short queues observed in LGE 2021.

Figure 2: Time spent queuing before voting, 2009–2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: "How long did you queue before voting?"

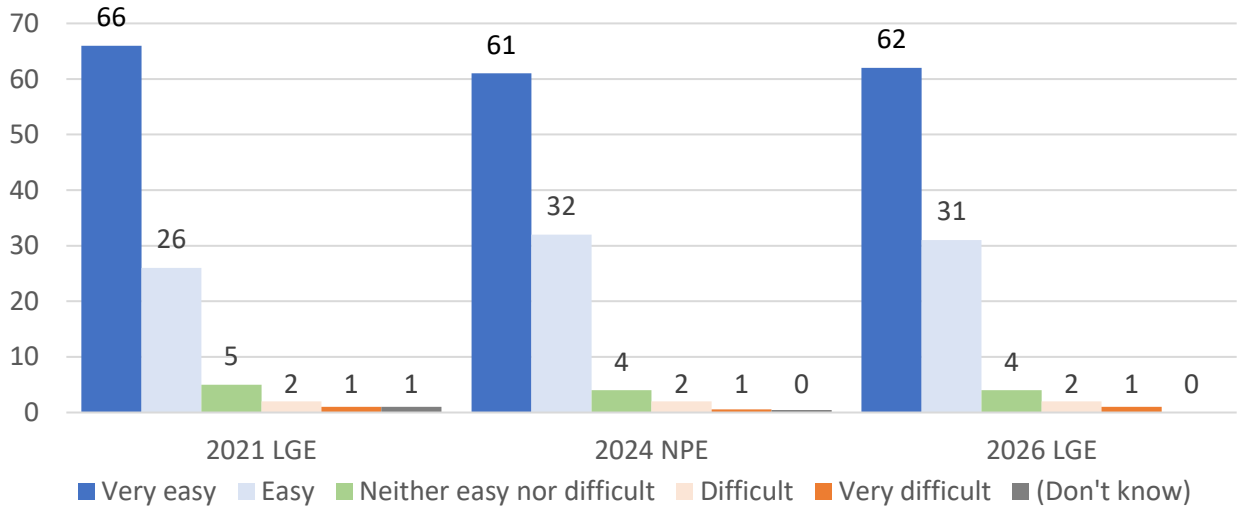


Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2009-2026

Satisfaction with ballot paper

Most voters were satisfied with the balloting procedures at their voting stations. Approximately three-fifths of voters (62%) found it 'very easy' to find their preferred party or candidate of choice on the ballot in LGE 2026 and 31% 'easy' to locate (93% combined). As shown in **Figure 3**, this result is virtually equivalent to the pattern observed in the 2024 NPE and only slightly lower than in 2021 LGE. Only two percent of voters found it 'difficult' to find their party on the ballot and 1% asserted that it was 'very difficult'.

Figure 3: Ease of finding a party or candidate on ballot papers, 2021, 2024 and 2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question, "How easy or difficult was it to find your party or candidate of choice on the ballot papers?"



Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2019; 2024; 2026

Satisfaction with the ballot papers used by the voting public at their voting station was similarly high. A total of 94% were satisfied on aggregate with the ballot papers used in the election, with 58% 'very satisfied' and 35% 'satisfied'.

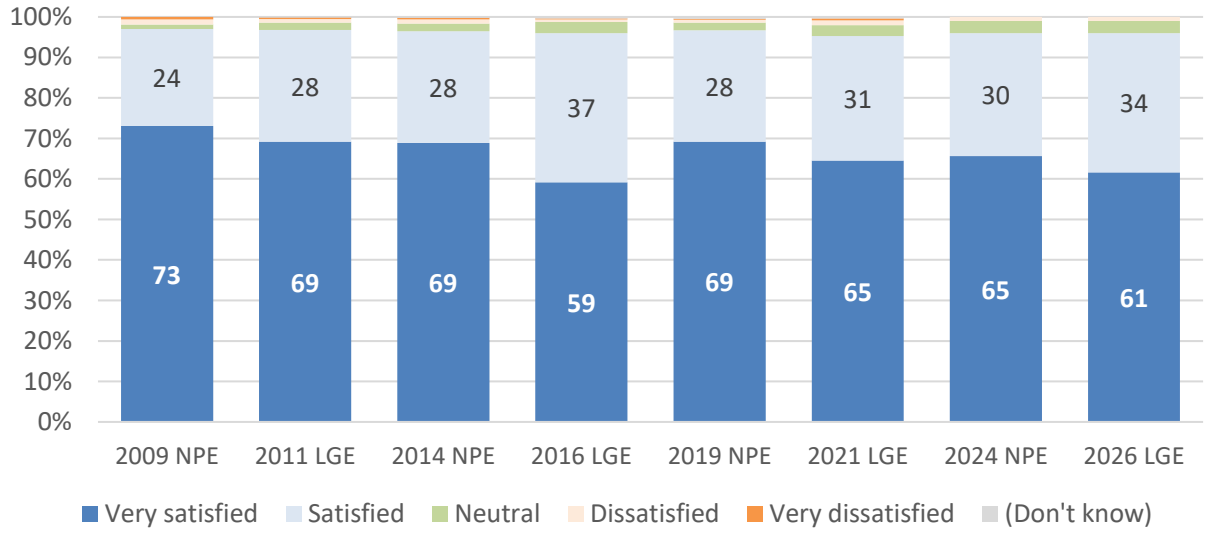
THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION'S PERFORMANCE AND CONDUCT

This section presents voters' evaluation of the performance of the Electoral Commission and shows that most voters trusted the Commission. It also investigates satisfaction with the quality of service from electoral officials, highlighting high satisfaction rates and positive evaluations on attributes like helpfulness and professionalism. Additionally, it assesses how well voting procedures accommodate the needs of vulnerable groups (such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, pregnant women and voters with babies).

Evaluation of electoral officials

ESS respondents were asked if they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the **quality of service** that the Electoral Commission's officials provided to voters at the voting station. The HSRC found that 96% of voters were satisfied overall with the service provided by IEC officials, with 61% 'very satisfied' and 34% 'satisfied' (**Figure 4)**. Only a nominal proportion (1%) of voters were either 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied'. The combined satisfaction level remained broadly consistent with previous elections, though the share reporting that they were 'very satisfied' was slightly lower in the 2026 LGE than it was in the 2024 NPE.

Figure 4: Evaluations of electoral staff at voting stations, 2009-2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: "Are you satisfied with the quality of service that the IEC officials provided to voters?"

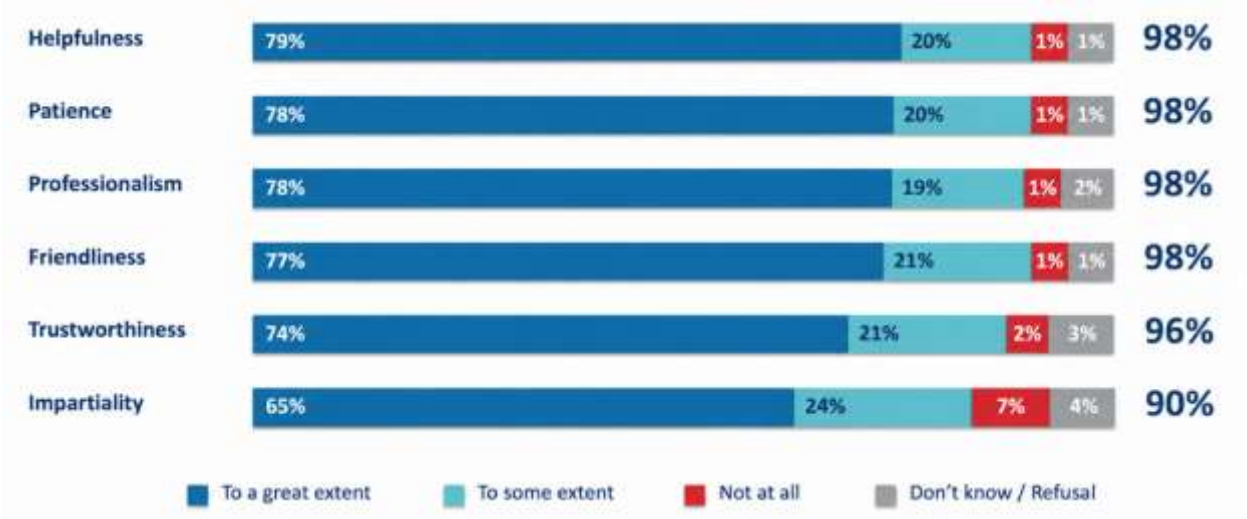


Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2009-2026

As part of the ESS questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate officials on the following six different attributes: (i) friendly; (ii) patient; (iii) helpful; (iv) trustworthy; (v) impartial; and (vi) professional. It was apparent that a clear majority of the voter population gave electoral officials a positive rating on all of these indicators in the 2026 LGE (**Figure 5**). Of the six, the indicator that received the most positive evaluation from voters was 'helpfulness'. Almost four-fifths (79%) of voters described officials as helpful to 'a great extent'. The indicator that received the lowest rating was 'impartiality'. Roughly two-thirds (65%) of the electorate said officials were impartial to a great extent and 24% told fieldworkers that they were unbiased to some extent. Only a minority stated that officials were not

impartial (7%) and 3% were unsure of how to answer the question. Voter evaluations of impartiality in the 2026 LGE are consistent with what we observe in the 2016 LGE and the 2021 LGE.

Figure 5: Evaluations of electoral staff conduct at voting stations, 2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: "To what extent do you think the IEC officials at this voting station were …?"

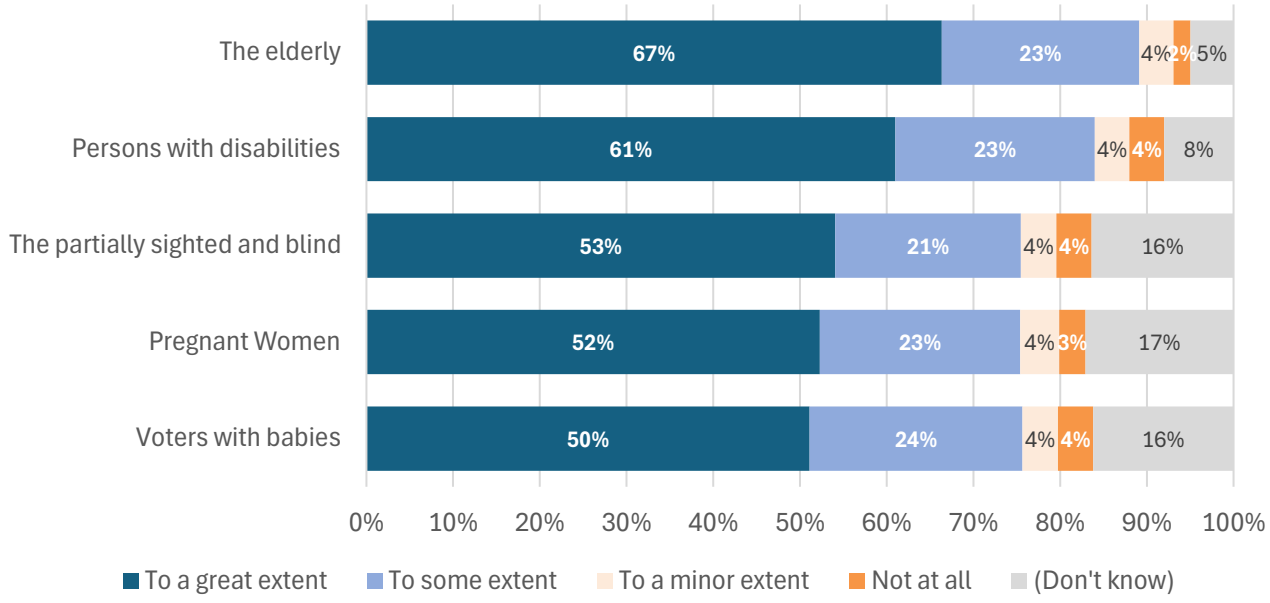


Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2026

Consideration of voting procedure for voters with special needs

During the course of the ESS questionnaire, voters were asked how far they thought that voting procedures at the voting station considered the **needs of vulnerable groups**: (i) the elderly; (ii) persons with disabilities; (iii) the partially sighted; (iv) the blind; (v) women; and (vi) women with babies. Most voters had a positive appraisal of how the Commission provided for vulnerable groups (**Figure 6**).

Figure 6: Voter assessments of how well voting procedures accommodated the needs of vulnerable voter groups, 2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: "To what extent did the voting procedure at this voting station consider the needs of special groups?"



Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2026

Approximately two-thirds (67%) of the voting population felt that voting procedures considered the needs of the elderly to a great extent. Concerning persons with disabilities, three-fifths (61%) of the voting population believed that they were considered to a great extent. More than half (53%) of voters felt that the needs of partially sighted or blind people were accommodated to a great extent, and approximately half asserted that the needs of pregnant women (52%) and voters with babies (50%) were addressed to a great extent.

Importantly, these differences should be interpreted alongside variations in voters' level of uncertainty in responding. While relatively few voters indicated that the needs of these groups were not accommodated, the proportion unable to provide an assessment was considerably higher for partially sighted and blind voters (16%), pregnant women (17%) and voters accompanied by babies (16%), compared with elderly voters (5%) and persons with disabilities (8%). This greater uncertainty may reflect limited personal experience of, or exposure to, the specific accommodations provided for these groups, rather than necessarily indicating shortcomings in their provision. The findings therefore suggest that voting arrangements were generally perceived as inclusive, although awareness and visibility of accommodations for certain groups may warrant further attention.

VOTER EDUCATION

This section explores questions about voters' level of information regarding voting procedures for the 2026 LGE, examining whether the majority felt adequately informed about the election. Furthermore, it examines the effectiveness of the Electoral Commission's voter education campaign and will show that most voters considered it very effective. Results from the current survey wave of the ESS will be compared to past waves, showing an improvement over previous survey rounds.

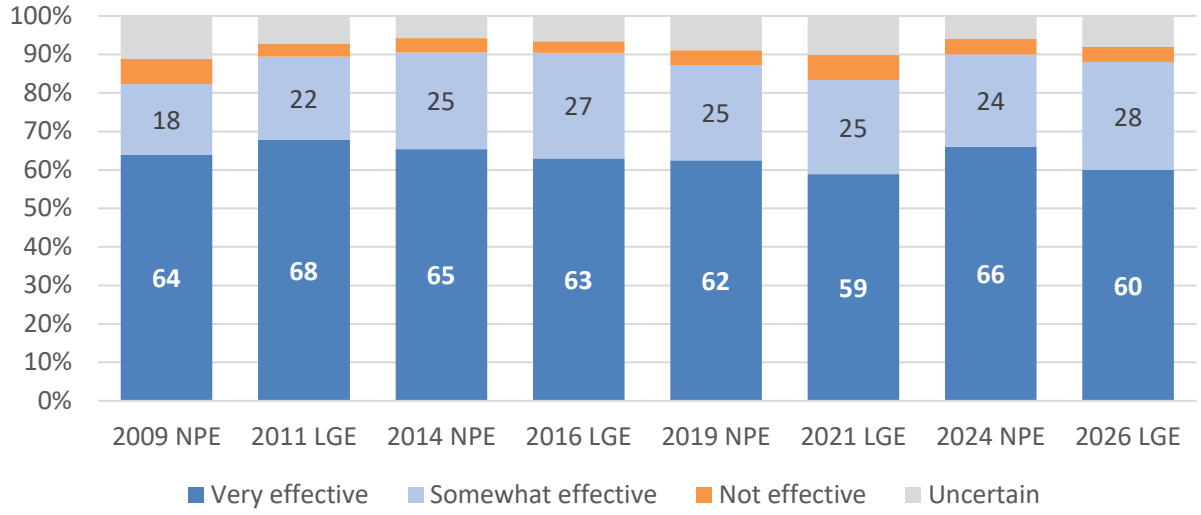
Level of information voters had about the voting procedures

The Electoral Commission was interested in assessing whether voters felt adequately informed about voting procedures ahead of the 2026 LGE. As part of the ESS, respondents were asked, "Do you think you had enough information about the voting procedures (including registration and the location of the voting station) before this election?" The findings indicate that **nearly three-quarters (73%) of voters felt they had received sufficient or more than sufficient information about voting procedures**. Just over half (54%) considered the amount of information they had received to be adequate, while a further 19% felt they had received either too much or far too much information. By comparison, approximately a quarter (25%) reported having insufficient information, comprising 13% who indicated that they had received too little information and a further 13% who felt they had received far too little. Overall, these results suggest that most voters felt adequately informed about the voting process, although a minority perceived gaps in the information available to them ahead of Election Day.

Effectiveness of the Electoral Commission's voter education campaign

The ESS assessed voters' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Electoral Commission's voter education campaign for the 2026 LGE. Overall, **88% of voters rated the campaign as effective**, comprising 60% who considered it *very effective* and 28% who regarded it as *somewhat effective*. Only 4% considered the campaign ineffective, while the remaining 8% were uncertain. As illustrated in **Figure 7**, this represents a modest decline from the 2024 National and Provincial Elections, when 90% rated the campaign as effective (66% very effective and 24% somewhat effective). The decline was concentrated in the proportion giving the highest effectiveness rating, rather than in overall positive assessments.

Figure 7: Evaluation of the IEC voter education campaign, 2009-2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: "How effective was the IEC's voter education campaign for these elections?"



Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2009-2026

Voters were also asked to assess the usefulness of the Commission's voter education campaigns in providing electoral information. **Approximately four-fifths (79%) considered the campaigns useful**, with 50% describing them as *very useful* and 29% as *somewhat useful*. A further 9% considered the campaigns not at all useful, while 5% had not heard about them and 7% were uncertain. These findings demonstrate that the IEC's voter education activities continued to be well received by the electorate, with a substantial majority of voters rating the campaigns as both effective and useful. Although overall effectiveness ratings were marginally lower than in 2024, the results indicate sustained positive perceptions of the Commission's voter education efforts and their contribution to informing voters about the electoral process.

Overall trust in the Electoral Commission

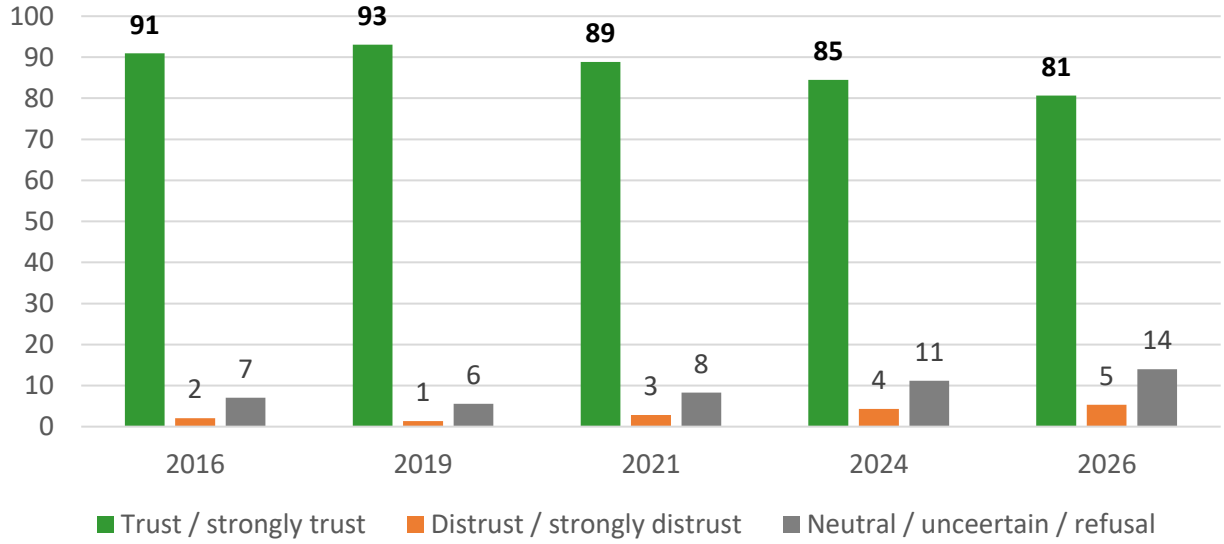
The Electoral Commission continued to enjoy substantial levels of trust among voters participating in the 2026 LGE, with approximately four-fifths **(81%) indicating that they either *trusted* or *strongly trusted* the election management body**. While this represents a slight decline from the levels recorded in LGE 2016 (91%), LGE 2021 (89%) and NPE 2024 (85%) elections, confidence in the Commission remains high among participating voters (**Figure 8**). Comparisons with nationally representative surveys conducted by the HSRC also indicate that those who participate in elections tend to express considerably higher levels of trust in the Commission than the general adult population.

To better understand the factors underpinning these assessments, the ESS included an open-ended question inviting respondents to explain their level of trust in the Commission. Analysis of these responses identified several recurring themes that help explain both positive and negative perceptions of the institution.

Among the 81% of voters expressing trust, the emphasis was primarily on the Commission's professionalism and competence in managing elections, the fairness, impartiality and independence of its operations, and confidence in the accurate counting of votes and the integrity of electoral procedures. Positive experiences of previous elections and the Commission's established track record also featured prominently, alongside appreciation for the helpfulness, courtesy and professionalism of electoral officials. Other considerations included the orderly and efficient conduct of voting,

confidence in ballot secrecy, safety and transparency, and the absence of personal experiences or evidence that would give respondents reason to question the Commission's integrity.

Figure 8: Voter confidence in the IEC, 2016-2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: "How effective was the IEC's voter education campaign for these elections?"



Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2009-2026

Among the 5% expressing distrust, recurring themes were perceived corruption or dishonesty, doubts about vote counting and results, perceived political bias, past controversies and media reports, and broader political or institutional distrust. These statements reflect voters' perceptions and allegations, not independently established facts.

FREENESS AND FAIRNESS

This section investigates voter satisfaction with the integrity of the 2026 LGE, looking at the perceived level of secrecy and security at voting stations. It also assesses confidence in accurate vote counting. Moreover, the text explores perceptions of electoral freeness and fairness, noting that the majority of voters believe that the elections were free and fair. This is a finding that is consistent with past surveys.

Safety and security

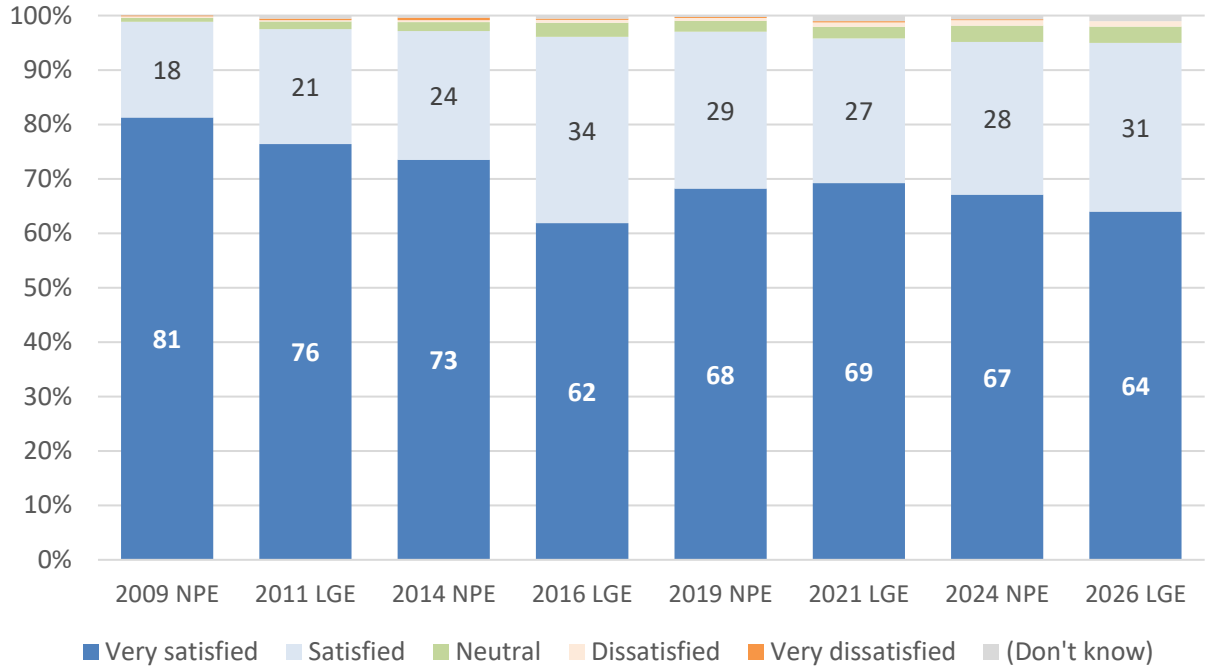
ESS respondents were asked if they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the **safety and security** provided at the voting station. The share of the voter population who was very satisfied with this issue was 64% in 2026 LGE and 31% stated that they were satisfied. Only an insignificant portion of voters said that they were either dissatisfied (1%) or very dissatisfied (1%) with the security provided at their voting station. This figure is consistent with what was observed during local government elections in 2021 LGE.

Perceived secrecy of vote

When asked, a large majority of the voting population expressed satisfaction with the **secrecy of their vote.** About three-fifths (64%) said that they were very satisfied and 31% told us that they were fairly satisfied. Only a minor proportion of voters conveyed dissatisfaction with the secrecy of their vote, with 1% being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Comparing these findings over time, it is clear that there

has been a distinct decline in the share stating that they were 'very satisfied' between survey rounds in 2009 and 2016 (**Figure 9**).

Figure 9: Perceived secrecy of the vote, 2009-2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: "Are you satisfied that your vote in this voting station was secret?"



Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2009-2026

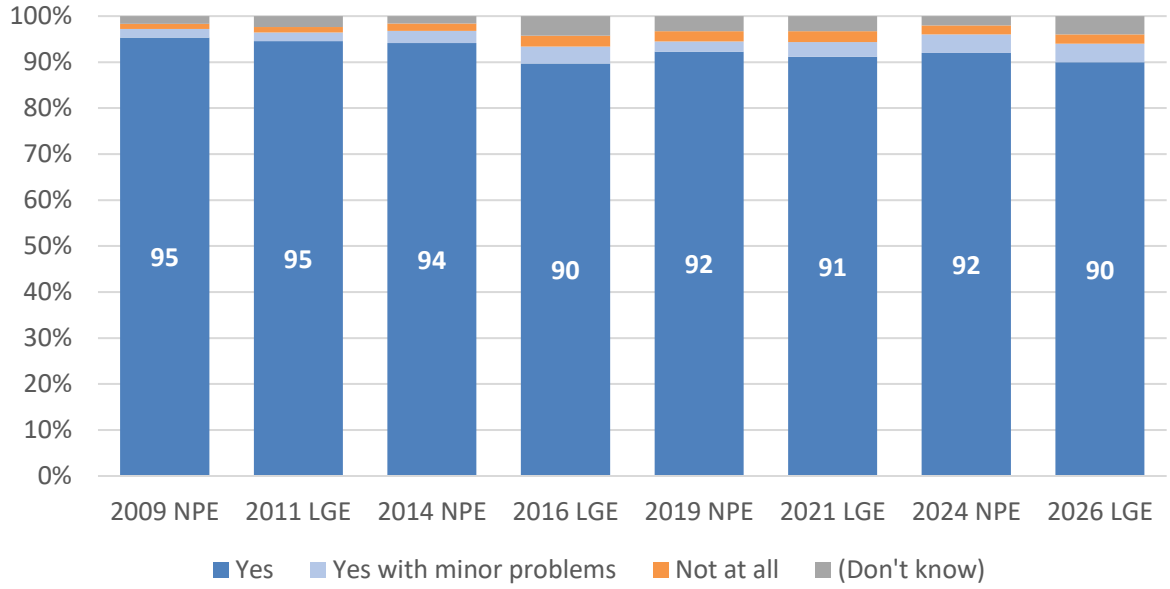
Accuracy of vote counting

The bulk of 2026 LGE voters believed that their vote would be counted accurately. More than half (51%) of voters were completely confident that their votes would be accurately counted. A significant proportion (32%) said that they were very confident and 9% of voters were quite confident. A small minority stated that they had a little confidence their vote would be counted accurately (4%) and 2% were not confident at all. This level of confidence was an improvement on what was observed in the 2024 NPE.

Electoral freeness and fairness

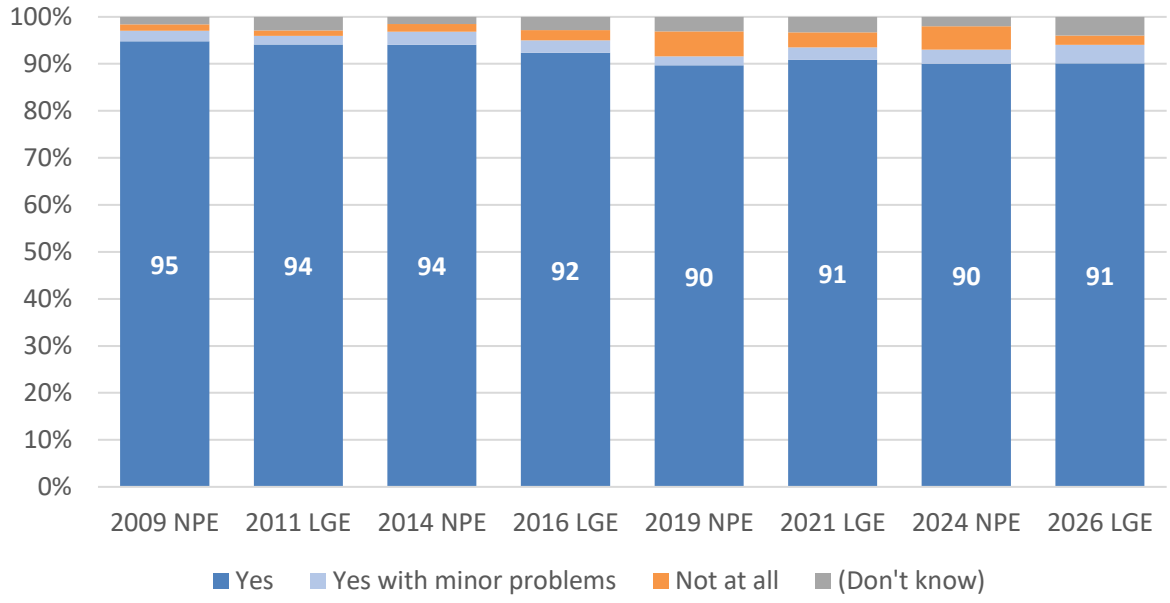
In order to provide an assessment of how the electorate felt about this crucial issue, voters were asked if they thought that the **election procedures were free**. The overwhelming majority (90%) of the voting population said that the procedures were free (**Figure 10**). A marginal fraction of voters in 2026 LGE believed that there had been minor problems (4%) and 2% told us that the elections were not at all free. These figures correspond to what we have seen in past rounds of the survey and show that the voting public believes in the integrity of South African elections.

Figure 10: Overall voter assessment of the freeness of the election, 2009-2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: "Do you think that the election procedures were free?"



Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2009-2026

Figure 11: Overall voter assessment of the fairness of the election, 2009-2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: “Do you think that the election procedures were fair?”



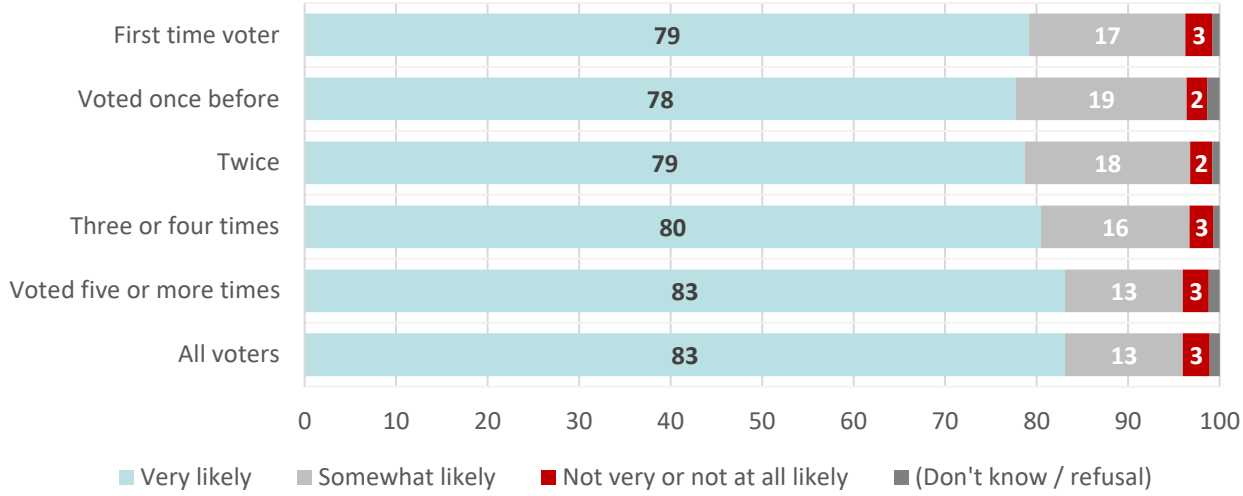
Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2009-2026

In a follow-up, voters were asked whether the **election procedures were fair**. Responses were quite similar to the previous question on free procedures (**Figure 11**). It would appear that about nine in ten voters felt that the voting procedures for the 2026 LGE were fair. Only a small segment of the voting public thought that there were minor problems (4%), and 2% indicated that they believed the elections were not fair. These figures are consistent with previous survey rounds, demonstrating that the voting public largely beliefs in the trustworthiness of South African elections. Overall, we find that only a trivial segment of the voting population (1%) said that the 2026 LGE were *not* free and fair.

A CULTURE OF VOTING? FUTURE VOTING INTENTIONS

The ESS 2026 findings point to a strong commitment to continued electoral participation among those who voted in the 2026 LGE. An overwhelming majority (96%) indicated that they were likely to vote in future elections, comprising 80% who were '*very likely*' and a further 16% who were '*somewhat likely*' to do so. Analysis by previous voting experience revealed consistently high levels of intended future participation, including among first-time voters and those who had participated in multiple elections.

Figure 12: Intention to participate in future elections by voting history, 2026 (%)
Voter responses to the question: 'Thinking about future elections in South Africa, how likely or unlikely is it that you will vote?"



Source: Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS) 2026

These findings suggest that electoral participation remains an important civic commitment among those who cast their ballots, with a strong willingness to participate again in future elections. However, these results reflect the intentions of voters interviewed on Election Day and should not be interpreted as representative of the broader adult population, which includes non-voters. Furthermore, stated intentions do not necessarily translate into actual electoral participation

CONCLUSION

The 2026 ESS assessed voters' experiences of the electoral process during South Africa's seventh Local Government Elections, focusing on perceptions of electoral integrity and the operational performance of the Electoral Commission (IEC). Based on interviews with 13,198 voters across the nine provinces, the preliminary findings indicate that the electoral process continues to enjoy high levels of confidence among participating voters. An overwhelming majority regarded the election procedures as free (90%) and fair (91%), reflecting continued positive perceptions of electoral integrity.

Voters also expressed considerable satisfaction with the administration of the elections and their experiences at voting stations. Approximately 95% were satisfied with the quality of service provided by IEC officials, while 96% found voting procedures easy to understand. Notably, queuing times improved substantially compared with the 2024 NPE, with 91% of voters reporting that they waited no longer than 30 minutes to cast their ballots. Confidence in key aspects of the voting process was similarly high, with 95% satisfied that their vote had remained secret and 83% completely or very confident that their vote would be accurately counted. These findings point to generally positive

experiences of election administration and a sustained appreciation of the professionalism and service provided by electoral officials.

Despite these favourable assessments, the results also reveal some important areas of concern. Trust in the Electoral Commission remains substantial, with 81% of voters expressing trust or strong trust in the institution. However, this represents a gradual decline from 91% in the 2016 LGE and 85% in the 2024 NPE. Furthermore, while most respondents evaluated electoral officials positively, perceptions of impartiality were somewhat less favourable than assessments of other aspects of staff conduct.

An important overarching finding is the distinction between voters' positive experiences of election administration and their broader levels of institutional and political trust in the country. The consistently high ratings of electoral procedures, service quality, ballot secrecy and electoral fairness demonstrate that confidence in the administration of elections remains resilient, even as trust in the Electoral Commission has declined over successive elections. This distinction is especially significant in the context of wider public dissatisfaction with democratic performance and political institutions. It suggests that concerns about the broader political environment do not necessarily translate into negative assessments of the actual voting experience.

Overall, the preliminary 2026 ESS findings present a largely positive assessment of the conduct and administration of the 2026 LGE. The survey provides strong evidence that participating voters generally experienced the electoral process as accessible, professionally managed, free and fair. At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of sustaining public trust, strengthening perceptions of impartiality, improving electoral inclusivity and addressing information gaps and reported intimidation. Continued monitoring of these dimensions through the ESS series will remain essential for informing electoral management, promoting accountability and reinforcing public confidence in South Africa's democratic electoral processes.

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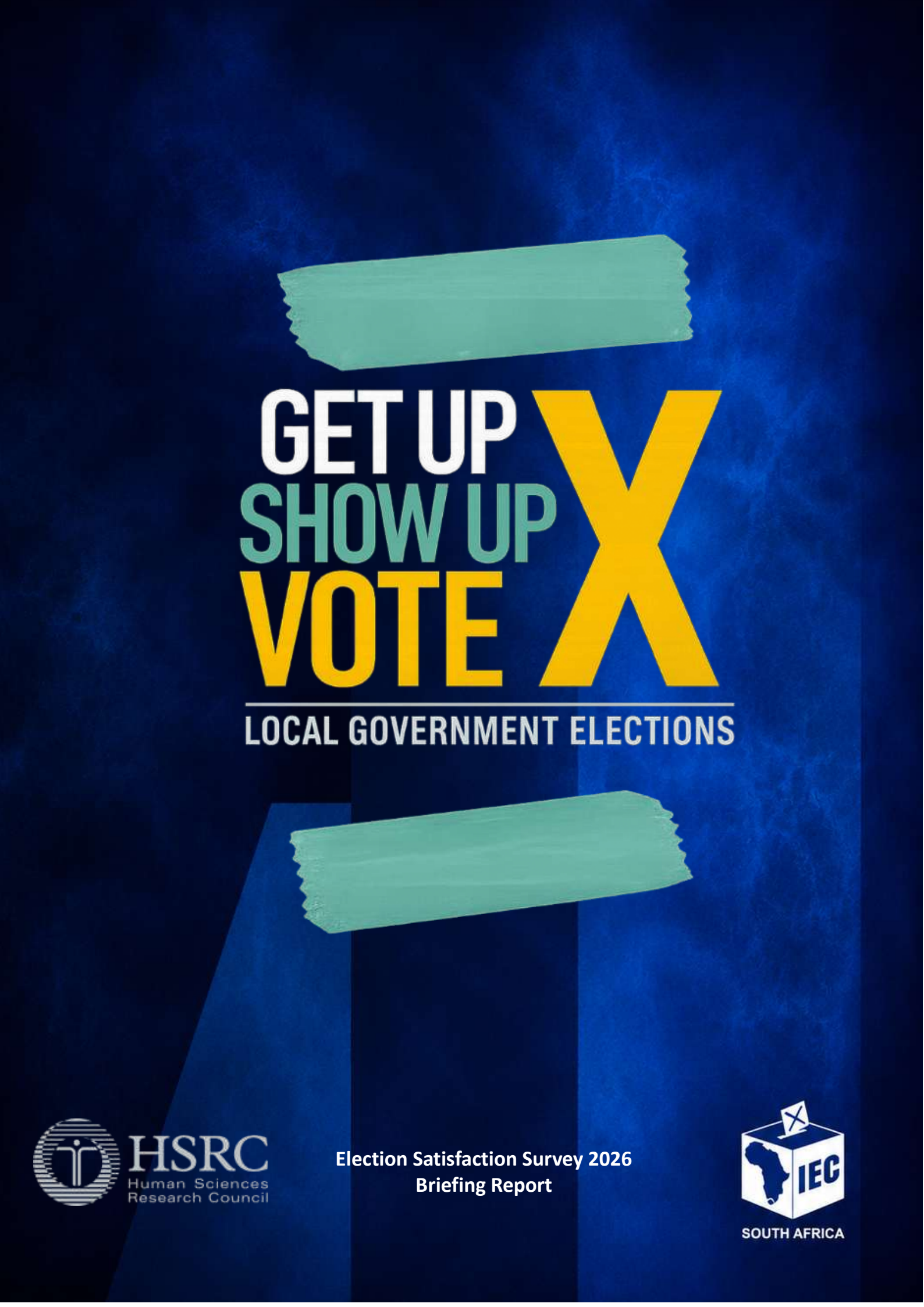
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