

Provocation Piece | May 2026

Democracy Doesn't Stop at the Ballot Box

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*“How do we make the value of voting visible
and measurable in people's lives?”*

Participant question, Insight Exchange May 2026

South Africa's democratic participation is in crisis, and the evidence is unambiguous. Local government voter turnout fell from 57% in 2016 to 45% in 2021. In Gauteng and the Western Cape, two of the most populous provinces, fewer than four in ten registered voters cast a ballot. In 2021, only the Northern Cape exceeded 50%. With local government elections scheduled for November 2026, the pattern demands a response.

Research shared at the May 2026 Insight Exchange session suggests that this disengagement is not passive indifference. Afrobarometer data shows that 80% of South Africans say unemployment has worsened, 75% express broad dissatisfaction, and 54% of registered voters say they do not intend to vote again. Most tellingly, 36% would consider a non-democratic actor, and 30% would forgo democracy entirely if economic security were guaranteed. These statistics indicate a population experiencing a decline in collective confidence and trust.

What makes local government elections particularly instructive is that they should, in theory, generate the highest level of engagement. Local government is the sphere closest to citizens' daily lives, responsible for water, roads, refuse removal, and the ward councillors meant to represent community interests. And yet it is precisely here that turnout is most persistently low. When failures of service delivery are experienced daily and the feedback loops between voting and visible improvement appear absent, the rational calculation shifts.

This piece draws on that session to explore a specific question:

If participation is declining and the evidence points to a trust deficit rooted in perceived unresponsiveness, could better data – about candidates, representatives and what local government actually does – play a meaningful role in rebuilding that trust? And if so, what would need to change for that data to reach people in forms that can use?

A Seasonal System

One structural feature of South Africa's democratic architecture that received sustained attention at the session is what might be called the seasonality of democratic engagement. The civic infrastructure that supports participation – voter registration campaigns, civic education programmes, candidate information, media coverage – intensifies sharply in the period before an election and then recedes. Political parties become visible in communities they may not have visited for years. Civil society organisations mobilise. And then, once the votes are counted, much of that energy dissipates.

What this means in practice is that the formal democratic system makes its most concentrated demands on citizens' attention at moments of maximum political intensity and offers relatively little structured engagement in the quieter years between. Ward committee meetings, IDP consultations and budget hearings are supposed to fill this gap, and in well-functioning municipalities many do. Across much of the country, however, these mechanisms are inconsistently convened, poorly publicised, and often held at times that exclude the very residents they are designed to serve – a ward meeting scheduled for 11am on a weekday being a concrete example raised during the Insight Exchange.

The result is a system in which many citizens experience their relationship with local democracy as episodic rather than continuous. They are asked to vote every five years, but in the intervening period, they have few reliable ways to know what their elected representatives are doing, how decisions that affect them are being made, or whether election promises are being kept.

“Voter apathy is not because people are lazy; it is a rational response to repeated disappointment. People have given up believing that voting makes any kind of change.”

– Mbali Ntuli, Ground Work Collective

This information vacuum doesn't sit neutrally. It tends to be filled by informal channels (rumour, social media, community networks), which may or may not accurately reflect municipal realities. The formal accountability channels are not legible to most residents, and the informal channels that fill the void are not reliable substitutes.

The Data Already Exists – It Is Simply Not Reaching People

A recurring observation across Insight Exchange sessions is that South Africa's data landscape is richer than its reputation suggests. The challenge is less often one of the absence than of accessibility, standardisation and use. The electoral data environment illustrates this well.

The IEC publishes candidate data for every election: names, ages, party affiliations, and ward assignments. Elections results are available at voting district level through an interactive Atlas and an open API (api.elections.org.za). Council meeting minutes are public by law. Councillor attendance records exist. Budget votes are logged. The National Strategic Hub's dashboards track fiscal health and infrastructure grant spending across every municipality.

64% of respondents in research conducted in eThekweni said it was very difficult to find information about their local councillor's activities. Nearly 70% said a centralised platform with voting records, meeting minutes and project updates would significantly help. The gap is not in the law. It is with the interface.

Open Cities Lab's **MyCandidate tool** demonstrated the scale of latent demand. By scraping IEC candidate data into a simple address-based interface, it attracted nearly 120 000 users in the days before the 2021 local government elections, with an average of 2.5 minutes of active engagement per session. The tool has since been adapted for Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe, confirming that this is not a uniquely South African problem.

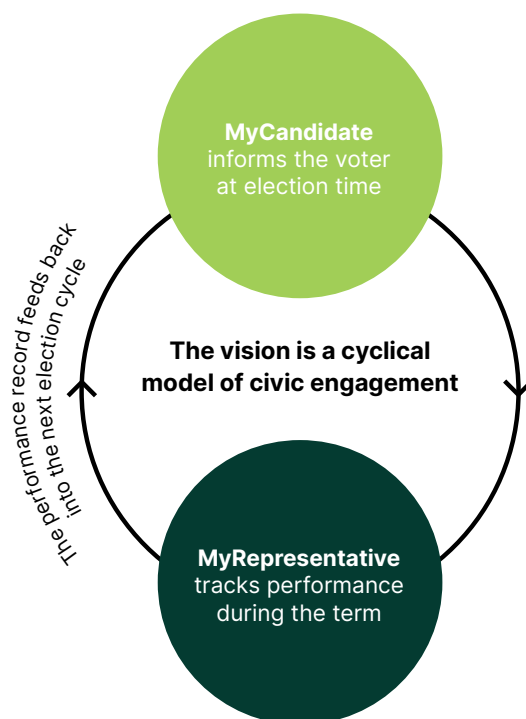
"All of this information is available. It is just not available in the forms that citizens can engage with or ingest."

– Sarah Findlay, Open Cities Lab.

From Election Data to a Continuous Accountability Loop

If candidate data can be made accessible before an election, representative performance data can in principle be made accessible throughout a term. This is the premise of Open Cities Lab's **MyRepresentative platform**, piloted in eThekweni, which allows citizens to retrieve information about their ward councillor – attendance, voting record, and ward activity – by entering their address.

This is what a data-driven democratic culture looks like. Not a single tool, but a connected ecosystem of information that accompanies citizens through the full electoral cycle and gives them the evidence to hold their representatives accountable at every stage.



A five-year record of public conduct is a more powerful basis for a voting decision than a campaign promise made two weeks before polling day.

The Resistance to Transparency

If the data exists and the tools are possible, why has this not happened at scale? The answer, surfaced candidly during the May Insight Exchange session, is institutional resistance. Municipalities and individual councillors are, in many cases, reluctant to embrace the level of transparency that performance tracking would require. No single organisation has stepped forward to own the accountability mandate, because transparency creates pressure, and pressure is uncomfortable.

This dynamic is not unique to electoral data. The Insight Exchange session on benchmarking municipal finance identified the same pattern: data exists, tools exist, but translating both into routine practice is hindered by unclear mandates, limited capacity and the political sensitivity of making performance visible. The session on migration governance surfaced an analogous challenge. In each case, the constraint is not technical – it is institutional.

“No organisation wants to be the first, because there is this tension around transparency and accountability.”

– Sarah Findlay, Open Cities Lab

The tension is real, but it is unsustainable. A democracy that cannot demonstrate its value to citizens will eventually lose their participation, and a democracy that has lost broad participation has a legitimacy problem that improved election logistics alone cannot fix. The session concluded that trust is the central variable: **citizens disengage when they cannot verify whether participation produces outcomes.**

Civic Education: Necessary but Not Sufficient

The session gave considerable attention to the role of civic education in addressing declining participation, and to its limits. The IEC’s current programmes include municipal outreach coordinators, a Tertiary Institutions Campaign targeting university students, and a School Democracy Initiative developed with the Department of Basic Education. These represent meaningful investment, but their measurable impact on turnout has so far been limited.

A striking comparison surfaced at the session: approximately 80% of Swedish citizens report having received civic education throughout their schooling, compared to 79% of South Africans who say they have received none. The comparison is imperfect – Sweden’s democratic history, institutional context and socioeconomic conditions differ substantially – but the correlation between sustained civic education and democratic participation is consistent enough to take seriously.

The Ground Work Collective offered a contrasting data point: of the 89 000 people registered through their combined registration-and-civic-education model, 82% subsequently voted – a substantially higher conversion rate than registration-only approaches typically achieve. Registration opens a door; civic education, in this model, gives people a reason to walk through it.

The important caveat is that civic education alone is not a sufficient response to declining trust. If citizens understand how local government works but experience it as consistently unresponsive, that knowledge may reinforce rather than reverse disengagement. The argument for civic education is strongest when paired with the accountability mechanisms described in this piece: data tools, accessible ward processes, and functional performance structures that give informed citizens genuine channels through which to act.

Six Actions Worth Taking

This piece does not propose definitive solutions. The relationship between data access, civic education and democratic participation is empirically complex. What follows is a set of practical directions that the evidence suggests are worth pursuing.

1 Scale candidate data tools for 2026

Tools like MyCandidate must be operational and widely publicised before November 2026 and sustained between elections as ward boundaries and candidate data evolves. Given the reported 82% mobile connectivity, this can be done via WhatsApp and SMS. There is also a case to be made that the IEC itself, as the custodian of this data and already committed to open access via its API, is well placed to take tools like MyCandidate forward as part of its own public communication mandate, rather than leaving that responsibility to civil society organisations working with project-based funding.

2 Build a national councillor performance platform

Drawing on existing public data – council attendance, budget votes, IDP participation, ward committee records – a national platform should make councillor performance legible to citizens in every ward. COGTA and SALGA are the best placed to lead.

3 Standardise and open municipal performance data

Meeting minutes, attendance records and budget votes are public by law but trapped in PDFs. Standardising these formats and making them machine-readable would unlock the information layer that accountability tools depend on.

4 Pair civic education with registration and sustain it

The Ground Work Collective achieved 82% voting conversion by combining registration with sustained civic education. Helping citizens understand ward committees, IDP processes, and councillor responsibilities is the foundation of legitimate planning.

5 Connect electoral and spatial planning data

IEC registration coverage, turnout rates and voting district geography are directly relevant to IDP processes and service delivery targeting. Better integration with the NSH's Spatial Development Intelligence System could support more evidence-based ward-level planning.

6 Clarify who owns the between-election performance information environment

A multi-stakeholder dialogue between COGTA, SALGA, civil society and civic tech organisations is needed to determine who is responsible for sustaining the performance information environment that ongoing democratic participation depends on.

THE CENTRAL PROVOCATION

Why do we design democratic systems as if citizenship only matters for one day every five years?

If every ward had a live dashboard of councillor attendance, votes and project commitments, would the participation picture look the same?

What would it take to make the democratic cycle a continuous experience rather than a periodic event?

Conclusion: The Data Is Ready. Is the System?

The provocations in this piece are not meant to diminish the essential work the IEC and the Municipal Demarcation Board do to deliver free, fair and credible elections. South Africa's electoral administration is, by any international measure, a significant achievement, and ensuring a successful election day remains a critical democratic priority in its own right. The argument this piece makes is complementary: the investments required between elections are what give election day its full meaning.

The question posed at the close of the May 2026 session – how do we make the value of voting visible and measurable in people's lives? – is not rhetorical. It is the most important planning and governance question South Africa's democratic system currently faces. The data to answer it is available. The tools to use it are being built. What remains is the decision to make sustained democratic participation a national priority and not just election-day turnout.

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