



**NATIONAL  
DEMOCRATIC  
INSTITUTE**

**FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

**THE 1998 LESOTHO ELECTIONS**

**VOTER MOBILIZATION,  
VOTER EDUCATION AND  
POLITICAL CHANGE**

**1997 Focus Group Project**

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**1997 Focus Group Project**

**Johannesburg, South Africa**  
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*“And I shall keep on voting, because if we don't vote, we shall not be able to tell who we are.”*

**Woman from Ha Seshote**

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## **PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE LESOTHO RESEARCH PROJECT**

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), through this focus group research project, hopes to contribute to the successful management of the 1998 Lesotho national elections. The research project's main objective is to facilitate an understanding of Lesotho voters' issues and concerns, their knowledge, experience and feelings about elections, their needs and their preferences regarding voting information and voter education materials.

In order to assist in the development of the optimum type of media for voter education and mobilization, NDI built focus group research capacity in the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Street Law and then contracted Street Law in its capacity as a research organization for the implementation of the project. Political scientist and research specialist Susan Booyesen facilitated the research training, and then monitored the Lesotho field research and analyzed the results. Street Law was responsible for all transcriptions and translations. In the planning and the implementation of the project, NDI consulted with a range of Lesotho NGOs and individuals, including political scientists.

The analysis is based on fifteen focus groups, which were conducted mostly in June and July 1997 across Lesotho, in: the lowlands and the highlands; and urban and rural areas. Specific areas where groups were held included: Butha Buthe; Ha Nqabani; Ha Seshote; Holy Cross; Maseru; and, Mhale's Hoek (See Table 1).

The participants in the focus groups were both urban and rural, men and women, all ages, unemployed, self-employed and formally employed, including professional people. Group participants were screened in order to achieve groups that were demographically homogenous, for instance in terms of gender, age, employment status and geography (Table 1 summarizes the composition of the Lesotho focus groups.).

**Table 1:**  
**Location and Composition of Lesotho Focus Groups**

Date	Location	Gender	Age (years)	Description	Number of Participants
26/6/97	Maseru	Men	20-27	Unemployed, urban/rural	8
26/2/97	Maseru	Men		Maseru/surrounding areas	12
27/6/97	Maseru	Women	All ages	Unemployed/self-employed, Maseru/rural	9
27/6/97	Maseru	Women	30-40	Self-employed	9
27/6/97	Maseru	Women	All ages	Unemployed/self-employed, Maseru/some rural	12
27/6/97	Maseru	Women	20-40	Lower socio-economic level	6
28/6/97	Ha Seshote	Women	40-60	Unemployed/subsistence economy, rural village	13
28/6/97	Ha Seshote	Men	All ages	Unemployed/employed, rural village	10
30/6/97	Holy Cross	Women	25-60	Unemployed, rural area, voter educated	9
30/6/97	Holy Cross	Women	18-40	Unemployed/some self-employed, rural village	12
1/7/97	Mohale's Hoek	Women	30-60	Self-employed, rural area, from women's organisations	9
2/7/97	Ha Nqabani	Men	18-25	Mixed employment, rural area	10
2/7/97	Butha Buthe	Women	18-25	Not (yet) employed, some education (also ongoing)	11
3/7/97	Maseru	Men	40	Employed/professional	6
4/7/97	Maseru	Men	13-17	Students, from Maseru and Roma	8

In all areas that were outside of urban Maseru, the cooperation of the chiefs was obtained before the arrangements for the groups were implemented. The chiefs and the community leaders who assisted in the organization of the groups, with the exception of one group, were not part of the group discussions.

The focus groups were conducted on the basis of a carefully compiled discussion guide (See Appendix 1). The range and order of the topics therefore were similar for the different groups. Moderators, who had been trained in the NDI/Street Law project of capacity building in research, conducted each of the groups. All questions and prompts were open-ended. Participants were keen to participate and happy to speak their minds. They fully accepted the research team's assurances of the confidentiality of the discussions. Discussions lasted between one and two hours. All groups were conducted in Sesotho, except for the Maseru professional participants, who preferred English. Sesotho speakers from Lesotho advised the moderators regarding the Lesotho use of the language.

Venues for the focus groups included community halls and rural homes. Participants were recruited with the assistance of Lesotho NGOs, community leaders, chiefs, church organizations and through the inputs of the members of the NDI/Street Law research team.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lesotho voters are caught between hope and despondency. They see small changes around them, but their lives remain a struggle against hunger and for education for their children. They are fighting against the sentiment that voting will never bring the desired difference to their lives. They have often stopped trusting the politicians, and feel uncertain about how to make democracy work for them. Yet these voters talk about their ongoing, deep-seated hope that voting eventually will make a difference. They need reassurance and empowerment on how they, as ordinary Lesotho people, can impact on public life in the country.

### TURNOUT PROSPECTS -- REASONS TO VOTE OR ABSTAIN

Low morale and disillusionment with the impact of voting is the biggest threat to voter turnout in the 1998 election. The overall trend is that Lesotho people want to vote. They wish to use the vote in order to get change. They desire caring government. But the current that is running against this is their loss of hope, loss of trust in politicians and their confusion about political parties. Turnout could either go the way of high participation or that of a big stay-away in 1998. The strongest feeling in these 1997 discussion groups is against voting in 1998. Nevertheless, the participants hope that they can be given reason again to hope and trust that elections will bring change. This indicates the extent of the need for motivation for turnout. The reasons for voting can be classified as "*positive*" (the belief that voting will bring change), "*neutral*" (citizen responsibility), "*negative*" (voting as an act of protest and to keep some politicians out) and "*conditional*" (only if political parties will improve). The reasons why Lesotho people are considering abstaining from voting in 1998 relate to disappointment with voting in 1993, lack of trust in representatives, confusion, fear and dislike of political parties.

### TURNOUT PROSPECTS -- THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DEMOCRACY

Lesotho voters express the need for voter education in both the narrow and the broader senses of the phrase. They need to know more about the process (for instance, registration and voting) and they want to have a better understanding of how democracy operates. Apparent antipathy towards voting does not deter the participants from expressing their desire to know more about voting and democracy. This finding confirms the trend that Lesotho people seem to treasure a deep commitment to using the vote to change their lives for the better, despite current discontent with government, political parties and representation.

### VOTER EDUCATION MATERIALS – CONTENT AND FORMAT

Focus group participants' preferences for voter education materials were tested. Preferences for content as well as format were noted. They look for strong message content in their voter education materials. Voter education materials that simply urge people to vote without holding out an inspirational message do not appeal to them. They want to vote specifically to get change to occur in their lives. They want this to be reflected in the voter education materials. Some of the strongest mobilization messages are for: unity and peace; a better life; cooperation; and, understanding of

democracy. Participants also have strong preferences for process messages with clear instructions on the details of registration and voting. The following are types of messages that are popular: step-by-step explanations of processes; explanations of the ballot form; and friendly people assisting in the process. Despite possibly having voted before, these voters seek confirmation and reassurance.

## **VOTER EDUCATION STYLES AND AGENCIES**

The Lesotho voters set specific criteria for their voter educators: they have to be neutral, perhaps even outsiders; and they have to be available for interaction. Because Lesotho politics is seen as polarized, the participants do not unconditionally trust Lesotho organizations to manage to do the job in an unbiased way. The preferred format for voter education is without a doubt interactive. Voter educators have to be available to answer questions, to truly help people understand the process of elections. Voter education materials have to be backed up by personal availability of the voter educators. They require workshops and direct, personal contact. This format will enable them to ask questions and to request more explanations. The preferred agencies are outsiders (because of neutrality), radio (because of its fairly wide reach to the populace), specialized agencies (clinics, etc., because they are available, and are guaranteed some access to people) and government officials (because they did a good job the last time around). NGOs, these people stress, may be suitable, but they simply do not know them well enough to be able to judge.

## **THE INDEPENDENT ELECTORAL COMMISSION (IEC)**

The IEC is poorly known, but amongst the Lesotho people who are familiar with it, it is well regarded and legitimate. The urban elites are the groups that know most about the IEC. Whilst only four of the fifteen groups are willing to express opinions on the IEC, some others "*have heard*" about it, but did not want to offer opinions. More than half of the focus groups have "*not heard about the IEC at all.*" Amongst those who know about the IEC, it is seen in 1997 to be inquiring about the voters' needs, is teaching people how and where to vote and is trying to ensure the fairness of the forthcoming elections. Participants have various suggestions on how the IEC should conduct its work; they deem independence, efficiency and cooperation with other agencies as core criteria.

## **WOMEN AND ELECTIONS**

There is widespread optimism that the qualities of women provide the basic ingredient for what is needed to make Lesotho a caring nation that addresses social need. Participants have two types of reasons for wanting to see more women in Lesotho politics. First, the characteristics that are associated with women are those that are seen to be typical of the current needs of Lesotho people. Second, and because Lesotho government is overwhelmingly comprised of men, there is a feeling that men have failed Lesotho. There is consensus that women have the empathy that will empower them to make a real difference to public life in Lesotho. Despite this, there is some skepticism about women who are in parliament and public life and are not seen to be fulfilling these expectations. The positive images of women mainly derive from the fact that they are seen as the strength of the Sesotho people – the ones who work the land, sell their produce and sustain their families. Participants point out that it is the women who feel most strongly about the education of their children and the security for the elderly. The women therefore need to take these concerns into the public sphere. Both women and men stress that women need assistance to translate this optimism into the fields of the nomination of candidates and participation in campaigns. Women need to be assisted not just to sit in parliament, but to use that platform for the advancement of women's and social issues.



## THE MOOD OF THE LESOTHO VOTERS

### MAIN TRENDS

Lesotho voters are caught between a spiral of despondency and "*hoping for hope.*" They see small changes around them, but their lives remain a struggle against hunger and for the education of their children.

They see little chance to escape from a perceived downward trend. They are struggling to overcome the sentiment that voting will never make the difference to their lives. They have stopped trusting the politicians, and feel uncertain about the sense of democracy. Despite this, they have an ongoing, deep-seated perseverance in the hope that voting eventually will make a difference.

### THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN HOPE AND DESPONDENCY

Lesotho people desire serious changes to their lives, change that will give them visibly caring government. They want contact with the people and feedback from the government.

Concrete starting points for the government to show that it cares would be improved access to education and job creation for the people.

*"Our children are wandering the streets because they do not have jobs. The government will turn our children into animals."*

Whereas the overall mood is seriously despondent, the participants identify the positive things that have happened. These include the: creation of *fato-fato* jobs; building of roads; more public transport; better access to water; more businesses starting up; provision of a new hospital; some access to electricity; and, more political freedom. On all of these fronts, however, most participants urge further improvements.

*"Some things have been changing... There is this process, the fato-fato."*

*"People move around freely today, without any fear of being assaulted."*

*"Every country has its problems. We have to sit with our problems and get used to them."*

The positives almost invariably are linked to the actions that had been taken by previous Lesotho regimes. An example is the Lesotho Highlands Water project. Only minor positive changes to their lives are associated with the 1993 election and subsequent government.

*"Existing changes were done by Jonathan, his successors so far have done nothing."*

The negatives permeate the group discussions. Unemployment, hunger and the high cost of education are the most important negatives. Other issues, which make the participants despondent, include problems with: access to land, water and transport; social decay; and, pensions.

*"The life I lead is the life of hunger... people like us continue to cry."*

*"I think of my children that they must attend school... And I will fail, due to a lack of money."*

In contrast to the positives, the negatives are directly linked to the current Lesotho government. A common sentiment is that the 1993 elections did not bring benefits. Rather, those elections brought broken promises.

## **UNFULFILLED PROMISES AND SOME EXCEPTIONS**

The group participants have a fairly pervasive feeling that the politicians have abandoned them. The voters have been left with broken promises, they say.

The things they repeatedly say about the politicians include that *"They forgot about us," "They do nothing for us"* and *"There is no difference because of the vote."* There are a small number of dissenting voices.

*"Our Member of Parliament visits this area, but he is always making promises. None of these promises have been fulfilled."*

*"People in government are showing that they indeed are working. I have seen a lot of changes since 1986."*

The things that the Lesotho participants feel were promised but not delivered, are: free education; jobs; development; an escape from poverty; and, more electricity, water and roads.

## **HOPE AND PRIDE**

The vast majority of participants has lost hope for a better future. They are not sure whether voting in 1998 could make things any different for them. *"The future won't be any different."* is the common feeling of many of the participants.

Access to education and affordable fees for education are the two, related issues around which people hold out the possibility of hope.

*"If we can get education, then we can have a better future."*

Despite failing hope, a strong sense of pride survives. Participants are proud of the peace and unity in the country, of cultural heritage and respect for tradition, of the fact that they are hard working and honest people, that a sense of self-sufficiency prevails and that there is some access to land.

## **HOW THE MOOD MAY AFFECT MOTIVATION TO VOTE IN THE 1998 ELECTION**

Low morale and disillusionment with the impact of voting is the biggest threat to high voter turnout in the 1998 election.

Disappointment with the effect of voting in 1993 negatively affect motivation to vote in 1998. However, there seems to be ground for hope that this trend may still be turned around. This is found in the optimism, albeit limited, that change will still happen.

### ***Loss of the Belief in the Vote:***

*"Voting won't make a difference."*

*"I once voted, but I do not see to what benefit. When they go out to elections, I will just sleep."*

### ***Belief that Voting Sooner or Later has to Bring Change:***

*"We will vote until we get what we want, until we get change."*

## WOMEN, ELECTIONS AND CHANGE

### MAIN TRENDS

There should be more women in politics, is the opinion across genders, albeit not with complete consensus.

There is optimism that the qualities of women provide the “material” that is needed to make Lesotho a caring nation that effectively addresses social needs.

### REASONS FOR WANTING TO SEE MORE WOMEN IN POLITICS

Participants have two types of reasons for wanting to see more women in Lesotho politics. In the first place, it is those characteristics that are associated with women that Lesotho is most in need of at this stage.

*“Women have a better understanding of social problems. That is what Lesotho needs.”*

*“Women will act on the basic needs.”*

*“The woman is the nurturer, but she is needed in public life too.”*

*“Once a woman is in parliament, she will find out what causes the great poverty.”*

In the second place, because Lesotho government is overwhelmingly comprised of men, and there is disappointment with government, there is a feeling that men have failed Lesotho.

*“The men in parliament have failed to turn Lesotho around.”*

*“As women, we need to prove to these men that they have failed to lead the country.”*

## **OPTIMISM ABOUT WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE**

There was consensus that women have the understanding of issues to empower them to make the necessary difference to public life in Lesotho.

*“When a woman is in parliament, she can raise the concerns that men might suppress.”*

However, there is also serious skepticism about some women who are in parliament and in public life.

*“They are there for the money. They are doing nothing for the other women.”*

*“It does not matter how many there are, their voices will still not be heard.”*

Women are seen as the strength of the Sesotho people – they are the ones who work the land, sell their produce and sustain their families.

It is the women who feel most strongly about the education of their children and security for the elderly, say the participants. The women therefore need to take these concerns into the public sphere, and make the difference.

The optimism about women in politics is not shared by all, especially not by men who have more traditional values.

*“From the beginning it has been obvious that a woman will always follow a man...”*

## **THE NEED TO EMPOWER THE WOMEN FOR POLITICAL LIFE**

Both women and men stress that women need assistance to translate their optimism into the nomination of candidates and participation in campaigns. Women need to be assisted not just to sit in parliament, but actually to use the platform of parliament to fight for women's and social issues.

*“Women can bring big changes to government.”*

*“I strongly encourage us women to participate in and contest these elections. It would be to our benefit.”*

## MOBILIZATION TO VOTE: PROSPECTS OF VOTER TURNOUT IN 1998

### MAIN TRENDS

The overall trend is that Lesotho people want to vote, they want to get change, they want caring government. But the trend running against this is their loss of hope, loss of trust in politicians and their confusion about political parties.

*"I want to vote until we get a government that gives us a better life."*

**in contrast with**

*"What difference will voting make to our lives?"*

*"Elections do not do any good for me, I am still unemployed and hungry."*

*"What is happening in Lesotho is disturbing the process of democracy."*

### FEELINGS ABOUT HAVING VOTED IN 1993

Voters in Lesotho are torn between feelings that the 1993 election process was a fair, peaceful process and the observation that voting had failed to bring change to their lives. Their belief in the process therefore contrasts with disillusionment with the results. The outcome of this clash of motivations is likely to have a serious impact on the 1998 election.

*"The last election brought about no change. Why should I think that the next election will be any different?"*

*"There were no big problems,"* is the consensus opinion when participants are asked about the process of the 1993 Lesotho elections. They remember the election process as fair and the officials as helpful. It was peaceful and no intimidation occurred.

*"We voted peacefully, without any threats to the people."*

Only small concerns are noted about that 1993 process. These include a few references to voting materials and ballot boxes sometimes arriving late, a few doubts about counting procedures, some queues, the process sometimes taking a long time and especially that there were no public reports on the 1993 process after everything was completed. Participants have a need to be informed about both the success of the process and the results generally and for their own regions.

In contrast, voters have serious doubts whether it was worth the effort to go out and vote in 1993. "Broken promises" and "They forgot the people who voted for them" are common remarks when the participants talk about their feelings about voting in 1993.

These experiences create doubts in their minds about voting again in 1998. They often feel that this may just be a waste of time.

## **MOTIVATION TO VOTE IN 1998**

Turnout could go either the way of high participation or that of a big stay-away in 1998.

The strongest feeling in these 1997 groups, however, is against voting in 1998. Nevertheless, the participants hope that they can be given reason again to hope and trust that elections will bring change.

*"I will keep on voting, until we get change, until we have a better life."*

It is important to note that the resentment is against politicians, and not against elections. If politicians show that they realize the need to act and show their commitment to people and progress, the voters may view voting much more favorably.

*"Of all these people who will campaign, there is not even one that I will trust to lead Lesotho satisfactorily."*

## **THE REASONS WHY PEOPLE WANT TO VOTE**

The reasons for voting can be classified as "positive" (the belief that voting will bring change), "neutral" (citizen responsibility), "negative" (voting as an act of protest and to keep others out) and "conditional" (only if political parties will improve).

### ***The Belief that Voting will Bring Change:***

*"Voting will help bring change."*

*"We must keep on voting, maybe one day we will get what we want."*

*"Everybody will vote, therefore I will too."*

**Citizen Responsibility:**

*"Voting is a citizen responsibility, people have the duty to vote."*

*"I will vote, despite the fact that there is no hope of changing anything."*

*"It is the law of the country for people to vote."*

**Voting as an Act of Protest and Keeping "Worse People" Out:**

*"I will vote in order to pass a vote of no confidence."*

*"If I abstain, victory may go to a party that is worse than the present party."*

**Only if Political Parties will Improve Their Acts:**

*"I will only vote if I know more about the parties."*

*"I will only vote if there is a new party with a new direction."*

**THE REASONS WHY PEOPLE DO NOT WANT TO VOTE**

The reasons why Lesotho people are considering abstaining from voting in 1998 relate to: disappointment with voting in 1993; lack of trust in representatives; confusion; fear; and, dislike of political parties.

***Disappointment with 1993 and the Experience of Democracy:***

*"The people who voted in 1993 no longer have hope."*

*"People are crying, whether they voted or not. My vote doesn't make a difference."*

*"Those who were elected, started eating well, and they forgot about us. They no longer go back to the nation. They no longer care as to how the nation would welcome them."*

*"I don't want to vote. I don't want to find myself complaining just like these other people (the other focus group participants)."*

*"The members of parliament were elected by the people, but they seem oblivious of the fact."*



***Lack of Trust in Representatives:***

*"They plead for your vote, then do nothing."*

*"Politicians are liars."*

*"If I vote, the person that I vote for will progress... but I will be left behind."*

*"They forget about our views, our needs."*

***Confusion about Party Politics:***

*"After the split (in the BCP) I am too confused to vote."*

*"I placed all my hope in the government of Lesotho. And look what happened."*

*"We just don't know where we belong any more."*

***Fear and Uncertainty:***

*"There may be conflict between the LCD and the BCP."*

*"We want to vote, but with the disagreements between the parties, what will happen after we have voted?"*

*"We are filled with doubts and fear of voting again, we do not know what is going to happen" (with the split in the BCP).*

***Dislike of Political Parties:***

*"The old parties offer nothing."*

*"We don't like the in-fighting between the parties."*

*"Voting helps parties to get into government, and then they practice corruption... I am perpetrating that very corruption if I vote."*

*"The nation is offended, because all political parties have failed to fulfill their promises."*

## DEMOCRACY EDUCATION TO MOTIVATE PARTICIPATION IN 1998

### MAIN TRENDS

Lesotho voters express the need for voter education in both the narrow and the broader senses of the phrase. They need to know more about the process (for instance, registration and voting) and they want to have a better understanding of how a representative democracy operates.

Antipathy towards voting does not deter the focus group participants from stating that they want to know more about voting and democracy.

### THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT DEMOCRACY

The group participants strongly express the need to know more about democracy and government. They want to know what they can expect from their representatives, and what they can do to make their representatives accountable. They also want to have better knowledge about their constitution, again with a view to get government to become more responsive.

*"We don't know why we are voting. In the last elections we were told to vote so that we can govern ourselves. Maybe somebody should explain to us why we are voting."*

From the discussions, the following checklist on democracy education needs can be compiled:

#### *Constitutional Education Needs:*

*"Right now we hear the people talking about the constitution. If only we can be informed on what the constitution is all about."*

#### *Democracy Process Needs:*

*"Politicians are not concerned whether people understand what democracy is all about."*

***Political Party Information Needs:***

*"I think these parties are confusing us."*

*"We need to get some explanation around these candidates, what they are standing for."*

*"I will only vote if I know what I am voting for."*

**THE NEED FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ELECTION PROCESS**

Participants emphasize that the fact that they may have voted in 1993 does not mean that they had actually understood the process. Having experienced voting does not mean therefore that they can go without voter education.

*"I think we can be more than happy if we get this voter education."*

*"We need another training for voting."*

*"The government must send people to the villages. They must come and teach us."*

Lesotho voters stress that they were not quite sure how the process had worked in 1993.

*"In 1993 we could not understand what was happening."*