

Political Party Funding Act: Four reasons the new legislation is a big win for our democracy



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Abstract

“The enactment of the Political Party Funding Act is good news for democracy in South Africa. The benefits far outweigh the costs of non-disclosure of private funding. However, its success will depend on its implementation to the letter.”

Keywords

Political Party Funding Act, legislation, accountability, democracy

It is a new dawn for South Africa. President Cyril Ramaphosa recently enacted the Political Party Funding Act (No. 6 of 2018) commencing from 1 April. The act will make it possible to know the sources of funding of political parties and this will go a long way towards strengthening public confidence in the democratic political processes in the country. Furthermore, by regulating private and public funding of political parties, the act provides citizens with an opportunity to hold political parties accountable, hence improving transparency.

But why is the implementation of the act good news for democracy?

First, we will recall that last year the Public Protector instituted a court case against Ramaphosa, whose election campaign allegedly raised more than R1-billion. The sources of the funds were unknown and suddenly became a subject for scrutiny, amid allegations that the sponsors could expect favours in return. It is such scenarios that the act seeks to prevent so that transparency and public accountability are improved, thereby promoting citizens' confidence in politics.

Second, the legislation closes the door to corruption and anonymity of private funders, whose interests are often unknown to the public. If left unchecked, undisclosed funding can be a threat to

any democracy and may lead to political turmoil as parties scramble for funding. With the enactment of the act, such threats will not be a concern as regulation of funding is enforced.

Third, funders' interests will be laid bare for public scrutiny as sources of funding from donors are disclosed. This public scrutiny is important for strengthening democracy as citizens examine the interests of the funders and question anything that is not aligned with national interests, that aims at promoting the wellbeing of all and not of the political party receiving the donation. An informed citizenry is well-positioned to hold political candidates accountable pre and post an election to ensure no favours are extended to the donors at the expense of our hard-won democracy.

Fourth, there is a high possibility that through the legislation, smaller political parties will be included in the sharing of the funding. This way, these smaller parties have access to financial resources to facilitate their campaigning and other operational errands, and are somehow cushioned against the dominance of bigger and more established political parties.

In conclusion, the enactment of the act is a win for democracy in South Africa. The benefits far outweigh costs of non-disclosure of private funding. However, its success will depend on its implementation to the letter. It is now incumbent upon political parties, the legislature and the electoral commission to see that the act is properly implemented come April. In the meantime, civil society and other non-state role players must play a vigilant role in ensuring that political parties remain accountable and transparent in their disclosure of private funding.