

Understanding issues of race and class in Election '09

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Introduction

As South Africans head to the polls in less than four weeks, there has been a great deal of consideration on the issue of race and the role it may play in this election, particularly in the Western Cape. However, the issue of class and its impact on the election has not received nearly enough attention. South Africa's stark levels of inequality are highly racialised. Fifteen years of democracy has also seen an increase in inequality within race groups, particularly among black South Africans. So what impact will this have on the election in April?

Election 2009 will be a watershed for South Africa's democracy. Some say that our democracy is approaching its adolescence and that these elections will indicate just how far we have come in consolidating our democratic gains. An important part of that consolidation is the transformation of race politics, whereby electoral support is less understood as being racially polarised, and more by voters' policy concerns and interests –read class interests.

Since the first democratic general election in 1994 the issue of race has, as a trend, seemingly played a polarising role in the choices made by South Africans in the voting booth. Moreover, parties' electioneering over this period has also, worryingly, reflected an appreciation of these perceptions, through explicitly appealing to cleavages between communities, as most evidently seen in the Western Cape. This in turn further erodes the already low levels of social cohesion across South African society and at times leads to social instability, which in the past has found expression through violence.

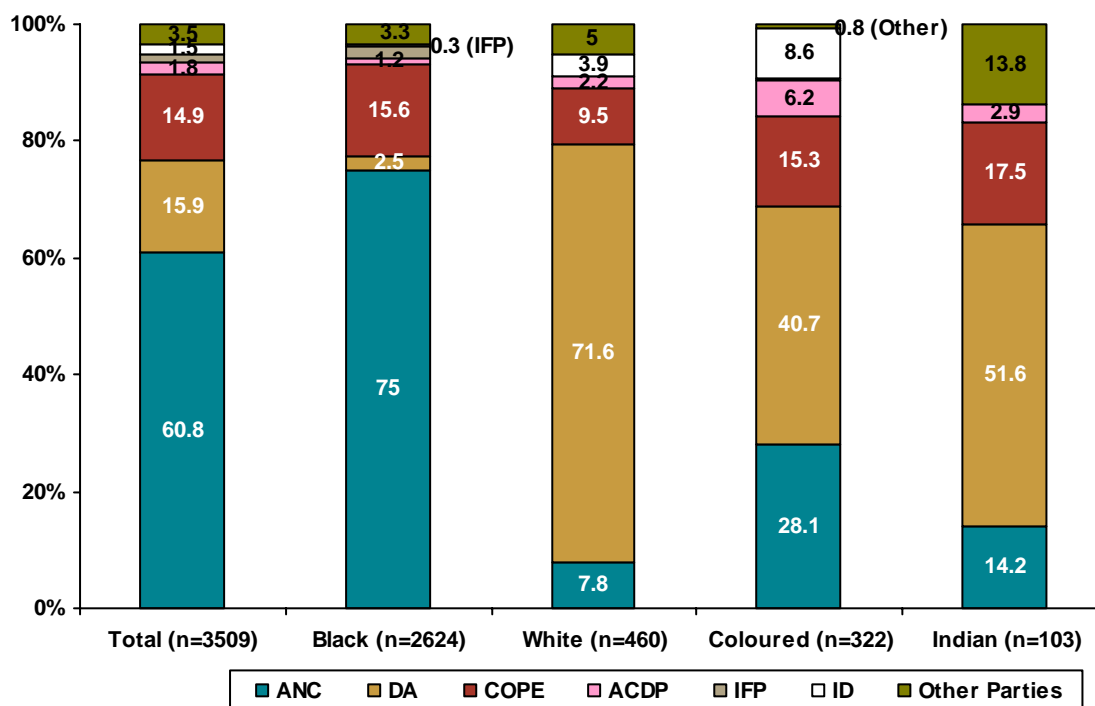
This brief seeks to understand whether shifts in electoral support in South Africa should be viewed through the lens of class in addition to race. Secondly, the brief will interrogate whether the political landscape has changed in such a way to cause significant shifts in electoral support during election 2009. But before we can understand this we need to assess the argument whether party support in South Africa can be explained in terms of race and why.

Voting in South Africa as a racial census?

South Africa has a large number of political parties, with 42 set to contest the April 2009 election. However, since the advent of democracy in 1994 the African National Congress (ANC) has enjoyed increasing majorities that saw the party gain a two-thirds majority in the 2004 elections. This has exposed a weakness within the political opposition with regards to their ability to challenge the ruling party during general elections. There may be a large number of parties, but there is very little electoral competition due to the mass support the ruling-ANC enjoys.

Historically, political party support in South Africa is highly racialised, as seen in Fig.1 below showing the results of a Plus 94 Research survey conducted in March 2009.¹

Fig. 1: Party support by race



Source: Plus 94 Research (March 2009)

As seen in Fig.1, support for the ANC remains high among black South Africans, while support for the Democratic Alliance (DA) is highest within the white group. Other minority groups such as coloureds and Indians, also seem to largely support opposition parties. Thus, it would seem that voting and party support in South Africa is characterized by race, particularly with regards to support for the ANC.

However, the question of whether voting in South Africa is a racial census – meaning that race is the main determinant of all voter behaviour - has been consistently challenged, and rightly so. Although race does matter in the electoral equation this does not mean that over three democratic elections South Africans have only affirmed or expressed their racial identity via the ballot box. Rather, their support for a particular political party has been influenced by a number of different factors. One of these is the perception of various parties' "racial credentials."² Collette Schulz-Herzenberg argues that party electoral support is in a large part determined by voters' views of the inclusivity of political parties. She suggests that

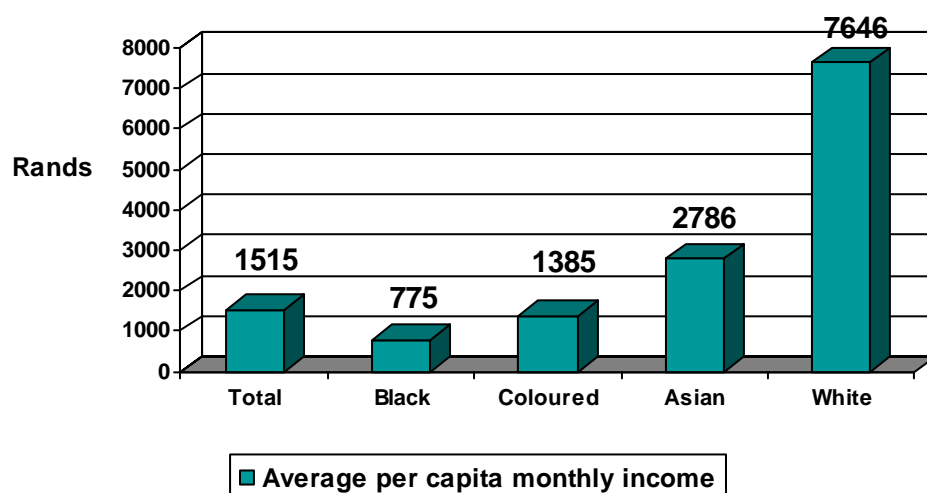
¹ Plus 94 Research, *Democracy Poll Survey*, (March 2009)

² Collette Herzenberg, *Elections Brief*, "Party Support in South Africa's third democratic election" (Idasa, Cape Town: 2004).

the majority of voters support parties they view as inclusive, whereas only a minority have an affinity with parties viewed as exclusive.³ This trend has been most prevalent in the province of the Western Cape, where traditionally black voters have delivered mass electoral support to the ANC, while national minorities' –read coloured and white- electoral support has largely remained with the opposition parties, such as the then National Party (later renamed the New National Party), and recently the Democratic Alliance (DA).

But further inspection of Fig. 1 shows that significant percentages of black, coloured and Indian voters are also indicating their intention to vote for opposition parties such as COPE and the DA. Thus, understanding voter behaviour simply by race is seemingly unhelpful. One needs to understand the interplay between class and race cleavages in South African society. The graph below, Fig. 2, shows levels of differences in average income by race groups in South Africa taken from the Income and Expenditure Survey conducted by Statistics SA in 2005/2006.⁴

Fig. 2: Average per capita monthly income by Race



Source: IES 2005/6

Fig. 2 reveals that on average, white South Africans receive much higher incomes than black voters. In other words, white voters are statistically more affluent than black voters. Thus, perhaps this reveals that class may be a significant driver behind voter behaviour and party support, in addition to race. Perhaps the concentration of support behind the various parties, seen in Fig.1, is also characterised by class cleavages. In other words, it may be that on average, support for the opposition is concentrated among higher income earners whereas the ANC draws its support from lower income earners.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Statistics South Africa, *Income and Expenditure Survey*, (2005/2006)

A recent MarkData survey (March 2009) finds that the majority of the ANC's supporters are to be found in the lower income groups. The relative majority of opposition voters, on the other hand, can be found within minority groups who are generally higher income earners than the black cohort.⁵

Issues of race and class cannot be divorced from each other in the socio-economic context of South Africa. There is essentially a wide overlap between the two.

On the other hand, racial credentials could also be a code word for class credentials. In other words lower income earning voters not only view opposition parties as being exclusive political homes for other racial groups, but also for other class groups. This may not be explicitly true for all lower income earners. For example, despite their position as low income earners as seen in Fig.2, the coloured minority group generally indicated a strong willingness to support opposition parties come April 2009, as seen in Fig. 1. So there are exceptions. But, nevertheless perhaps party support in South Africa's is better understood in terms of the social cleavages created by economic inequality rather than racial cleavages.

Can the interplay between race and class explain party support?

Although racial credentials may seem to matter in the voting equation, class may possibly play a larger role. Voters may identify more with political parties' policies as a reflection of their class interests. In other words party identification in South Africa may be driven more by class interests rather than 'racial credentials.'

Levels of party identification are highest among South Africa's black electorate. Schulz-Herzenberg also finds that on average between 1994 and 2006, 58% of black voters are partisan supporters of the ANC.⁶ Recent findings from the Afrobarometer survey (2008) indicate that 43% of respondents identified with the ANC. Although this is a drop from a previous level of 52% in 2006, it remains much higher than the level of identification enjoyed by the nearest opposition party the DA at 4%.⁷ The ANC also received 66.35% of the vote in the 2004 elections. The ANC's electoral dominance is thus largely due to the high levels of partisanship it enjoys among the black electorate who represent approximately 79% of South Africa's national population according to latest figures by Statistics SA.⁸

Much of the ANC's support is due to partisan identification. The weak shift in this identification from the ANC to the opposition in the past 15 years of democracy may also be due to the poor reception of opposition parties' class credentials. However, this may be more nuanced in the sense that an opposition party such as the Independent Democrats, has

⁵ Lawrence Schlemmer, *The impact of COPE on political support in Gauteng*, MarkData (2009)

⁶ Collette Schulz Herzenberg, *Trends in party support and voter behaviour in South Africa 1994-2007*, (2008)

⁷ Afrobarometer, *Public opinion in South Africa, October-November 2008 selected results from the Afrobarometer*, (2009) Johannesburg.

⁸ Statistics South Africa, *Mid-year population estimate report*, (2008)

received the greatest indication of its support from black and coloured groups as seen in Fig.1. Furthermore, Fig. 2 shows that on average the majority of these two groupings fall within the lower income earning groups. So the ID's inability to draw significant national support away from the ANC may not be best explained by a lack of class or race credentials, but rather its lack of a wider leadership base outside its national leader Patricia de Lille.

Nevertheless, any shift away from the ANC among blacks may further indicate a drop in the importance of race in the electoral equation. This is not to say that race would fall completely out of the equation, but rather that class interests may matter more to black voters in election 2009.

The Afrobarometer (2008) also asked respondents which party they would vote for and 45% of those willing to state their choice selected the ANC as the party they would vote for if an election were held "tomorrow". This is down 13% from the 58% who responded the same in 2006.⁹ Thus, a significant (though admittedly with a likely negligible impact on the national ballot in April) proportion of voters have indicated a willingness to take their vote elsewhere. But as previously discussed, ANC voters are highly partisan supporters and South African voters do calculate their electoral sums with the class credentials of opposition parties playing a large role. So will ruling-party supporters bridge this class divide and take their votes to the opposition?

The COPE Effect

The emergence of the Congress of the People (COPE) as a breakaway party from the ANC is significant in this regard. COPE may very well be perceived by black voters as having racial credentials not enjoyed by other opposition parties such as the DA. This may be in large part due to the fact that its leadership retains a well documented history within South Africa's liberation struggle and more recently, within the ANC government. Moreover the name Congress of the People refers to the adoption of the Freedom Charter, which surely is an attempt to evoke strong emotive symbolism among the black electorate. However, COPE has often been criticised as being "Mbeki's party." This is in reference to the widely criticised policies and autocratic style of leadership that characterised former President Mbeki's terms in office.

The dissatisfaction with Mbeki's tenure among the Leftist formations of the Tripartite Alliance, namely COSATU and the SACP, is well documented. And if media reports are to be believed, the ANC post-election 2009 is also widely expected to establish a more "developmental state", potentially clipping the wings of a publicly popular Treasury, and reportedly attempting to relocate some power over the Budget in a new Planning Commission within the Presidency.

The ANC is also commonly perceived to be leaning more Left under the leadership of Jacob Zuma, in contrast to the Mbeki era. Although this may well have been the result of rhetoric between the competing Zuma and Mbeki camps, but the perception endures among South Africans. This may alienate middle class voters who fear an "anti-business" ANC

⁹ Ibid.

government that is generally expected to intensify social spending and run up huge deficits in the budget, thus placing a heavy burden on taxpayers.

On the other hand COPE has made a significant attempt to contrast itself with the ANC, particularly on issues that coincide with middle class interests such as re-instituting the Scorpions. Thus, where the ANC is perceived as the party of the poor, COPE is perceived to be the party of the nouveau black rich. Thus, any shift among the black electorate away from the ANC towards the opposition is likely to move to COPE due to its class credentials, while its racial credentials would also not inhibit such a shift.

A shift of black electoral support from the ANC towards COPE is likely to occur along class lines where black middle class voters, under the perception of a populist ANC leadership in possible conflict with their class interests, would seek a new political home within the opposition. But how significant is this new emergent black middle class to the emergence of COPE?

Van der Berg *et al* found: “*inequality has remained stubbornly high, mainly because of rising inequality within race groups. There is evidence of a large and growing black middle class.*”¹⁰ In other words inequality is the highest within the black community, as seen in Table.1 below.

Table 1

Gini coefficient					
	1993	1995	2000	2004	2006
Black	0.547	0.568	0.609	0.598	0.594
Coloured	0.529	0.507	0.537	0.550	0.531
Indian	0.465	0.473	0.500	0.542	0.481
White	0.443	0.438	0.467	0.500	0.520
Total	0.672	0.674	0.682	0.678	0.685
<i>Source: van der Berg, Louw and du Toit, 2007: 29.</i>					

The black group currently has a Gini coefficient of just under 0.6, which measures as the highest level inequality within a racial group in South Africa. Thus, support for COPE among blacks who previously supported the ANC, can partly be explained by the high level of inequality within the black community of South Africa. The emergence of this black upper and middle class had led to the need for a party that represents these emerging class interests, while retaining the racial credentials currently enjoyed by the ANC among the black community as a whole.

¹⁰ Servaas van der Berg, Megan Louw, and Leon du Toit, *Poverty trends since the transition: What we know*, Stellenbosch Department of Economics (2007).

Moreover, political drama played out in the media in recent years regarding a number of ANC and Tripartite Alliance leaders may further have alienated these supporters. Thus, COPE arguably appeals to a multi-racial middle and upper class, whose support may see it establish itself as an opposition party post-April 2009. However, this does not mean that COPE will be unable to draw support from black lower income earners. The interplay between issues of class and race and the respective credentials they render political parties does allow for exceptions.

Thus, if electoral support and voter behaviour in 2009 is characterised more by class credentials than 'racial credentials,' then one would not expect this majority of black low income earners to shift their support to the opposition. In other words, a minimal shift in electoral support away from the ANC towards opposition parties, like COPE, will not mean that voter behaviour in South Africa remains racially polarised. Rather it affirms that voter behaviour in South Africa, due to the high prevalence of racial inequality, is generally polarised along class interests. The ANC's core constituency, which is black lower-income earners, will likely turn up at the polls en masse to support the ruling party, as they have consistently done in previous elections, under the perception of defending their class interests.

With regards to minority opposition voters, we are likely to see shifts among the opposition parties, but unlikely to see electoral support shift from the opposition to the ruling-party. Arguably this could also be seen as a defence of class interests against a dominant party that is increasingly perceived by middle and upper income earners as populist, pro-poor and hostile to their class interests. This perception among minority voters becomes even clearer when assessing the often cited fear of a continued two thirds majority for the ANC, under a Zuma presidency, in the upcoming elections. This is supported by the MarkData survey which found that Jacob Zuma is the most unpopular politician among respondents who identified with opposition parties, whereas he was highly popular with respondents who identified with the ANC.¹¹ Thus, the new leadership of the ANC has seemingly alienated middle and upper class minority voters.

A recent poll conducted by Plus94 Research suggests that COPE may receive as much as 15% of the national vote. The survey further finds that the new opposition party will enjoy up to 15% of the votes among the black electorate and just over 9% from the white electorate. The research also showed that the party would pull 15% of the coloured vote nationally. Thus, COPE seems to currently poll as the most multiracial opposition party, which is in direct contrast to the DA, which continues to enjoy the lion's share of its electoral support among white higher income earners.¹²

What emerges is that the overlap between cleavages of race and class across South African society merely reinforce each other. But what is key is that the emergence of a black middle and upper class has de-racialised the upper income group, which has traditionally been the key support base for the opposition. And along with this we have seen the emergence of a

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The Times Online, Plus 94 Research, (March 2009).

new political current, in the form of COPE. COPE is multi-racial in its support base while retaining its 'racial credentials.'

Conclusion

Voter behaviour in South Africa is not best explained by race, as popularly argued by a range of commentators. Moreover, although voting could be understood as racially polarised, this is purely a reflection of the high levels of partisan support enjoyed by the ANC among the country's dominant demography, black lower income earners.

Furthermore, the inability of opposition parties to attract support away from the ruling party could possibly be understood as their perceived lack of racial credentials. Whereby voters do not support parties based on an exclusive identity, but rather view opposition parties as racially exclusive while they view their own parties as inclusive of all groups. This divide is most apparent within the core constituency of the ruling party. However, the emergence of COPE may yet provide a glimmer of hope in this regard.

Furthermore, race and class are interrelated. They cannot be viewed in isolation of each other, particularly in the manner in which they overlap in the South African context. However, the perception of class credentials is what, in the final analysis, drives the electoral sums calculated by South African voters. Perceptions of class, more so than race, drive voter behaviour and inform voters' engagement with political parties. The partisan support enjoyed by the ANC among black lower income earners can be attributed to the popular perception among this demographic that the ANC is a party for the poor, whereas opposition parties are viewed as representing higher income earning minorities' interests. This does not mean that a voters' class determines where they place their X on Election Day, as seen in the case of COPE and the ID. But that the interplay between class and race determines voters' willingness to take their vote elsewhere.

Although there has been a slight shift of support over the past 15 years of democracy towards the opposition, this shift has not occurred where it counts the most, among the mass black electorate. The economic development of this group is intrinsically linked to the sustainability of a modern democracy in South Africa. Multiparty democracy in South Africa should be characterised by meaningful electoral competition, which would lead to more accountable and responsive governance. However, as long as the stark socio-economic inequality within South African society remains, the space for robust electoral competition will continue to be restrained.

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