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Race, Class and Voting Patterns in South Africa's Electoral System: Ten Years of Democracy[1]

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Abstract

In the run up to South Africa's three national elections both academia and the media advocated that electoral behaviour would be informed by the race census thesis. This article challenges this dominant thesis by using evidence from post-apartheid South Africa's three general elections which suggests that the racial census thesis is not the only factor that determines and/or explains voter behaviour of the South African electorate. The indications are that significant sections of the electorate make rational choices during elections, and decide on the bases of information available to them that guides them to choose which party most closely represent their material and other interests. Therefore the article concludes that the link between racial/tribal identities and electoral behaviour is not strong enough and that opposition politicians who do not recognise this will continue to make the mistake of basing their electoral campaigns on crude racial assumptions about the South African electorate, resulting in failure to attract the support of a cross-section of the electorate. And the latter is bound to have negative consequences for the consolidation of democracy in the country.

Résumé

En Afrique du Sud, durant la période précédant les trois élections nationales, le monde académique et les media affirmaient que le comportement électoral de la population obéirait à la thèse du recensement social. Cet article remet en question cette thèse dominante en se servant d'exemples issus des trois élections générales

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de l'Afrique du Sud post-apartheid, qui montrent que la thèse du recensement social ne constitue pas l'unique facteur déterminant et/ou expliquant le comportement des électeurs sud-africains. Ces exemples indiquent que de larges portions de l'électorat effectuent des choix rationnels durant les élections et se prononcent en fonction des informations qu'ils reçoivent, qui les poussent ensuite vers le parti qui représente le mieux leurs intérêts matériels et autres. L'article conclut ainsi en affirmant que le lien entre identités raciales/tribales et comportement électoral n'est pas suffisamment fort et que les représentants de l'opposition qui ne reconnaissent pas ce fait continueront sur la mauvaise voie en basant leur campagne électorale sur de grossières hypothèses raciales relatives à l'électorat sud-africain. Le risque est qu'ils n'arriveront certainement pas ainsi à s'attirer le soutien d'un échantillon représentatif de l'électorat. En outre, ceci aura forcément des conséquences négatives sur la consolidation de la démocratie dans ce pays.

Introduction

The year, 2004, was South Africa's tenth year of democracy. The anniversary was an important moment for it enabled South Africans to reflect on where the country has come from and where it was going. This reflection was made even more urgent by the general election that was held in April 2004, which forced the ruling party and its opponents to contend over the track record of the government in the last decade. When the dust settled and the electorate had made its choice, South Africa's political landscape showed signs of continuity and discontinuity. The African National Congress (ANC), the ruling party, and the Democratic Alliance (DA), the official opposition, had consolidated their positions by increasing their electoral support by three to four percent. The New National Party (NNP), as a national party and the dominant party of the apartheid era, was almost extinguished, while the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) lost control of its power base, KwaZulu Natal (KZN), to the ANC. Above all, there was the new kid on the block, the Independent Democrats (ID), which made a surprisingly strong showing and signaled that it was going to be a thorn in the side of both the ANC and the DA.

In the weeks that followed, analysts attempting to account for the outcome of the election retreated to their time honoured explanation: race. Since the country's first democratic election, politicians, political scientists and commentators who have explained the voting patterns and behaviour of South Africa's electorate have concluded that South Africa's electoral outcomes are race-based.

The 'race census thesis' advances the view that voting patterns in South Africa resemble a prism of racialised politics because racial and ethnic political identities predominate among the citizenry, with blacks voting for 'black parties' and whites for 'white parties'. What this means is that South Africans

vote, not on the basis of their interests and opinions, but rather through the prism of ethnic and racial loyalties.

In the context of South Africa's history this thesis has gained considerable credence; but it is flawed on two principal grounds. First, the explanation is problematic for it treats race as an independent objective variable without considering that there exists strong overlaps between racial and class identities. Second it simply assumes that race is an independent causal factor in voting behaviour, entirely discounting the possibility that class or perhaps some intricate mix of race and class factors affect voting behaviour. In the light of these caveats, this article refutes the dominant thesis on the determinants of voting behaviour in South Africa using evidence from post-apartheid South Africa's three general elections.

The article begins with an analysis of the 1994 and 1999 general elections on the basis of two published articles, the first by Adam Habib and Rupert Taylor on political alliances and parliamentary opposition, and the second by Adam Habib and Sanusha Naidu on the character and significance of the coloured and Indian vote. We then analyse the outcome of the 2004 elections to confirm our claim that the race consensus thesis is tenable.

The 1994 and 1999 elections

The 1994 election was more of an exercise in political liberation. It seemed natural that the African National Congress (ANC) would emerge victorious since their credentials as liberators could not be challenged, especially among the black electorate and others who opposed the apartheid regime. What was also expected was that whites, especially Afrikaners, fearful of living under a black majority government, would safeguard their interests by either voting for the National Party or for conservative right wing parties like the Freedom Front. A similar pattern of voting was expected from the Indian and coloured electorate.

The 1999 election was underpinned by this racialised view of electoral behaviour. In the run-up to the elections political parties configured their electoral campaigns on the assumptions inherent in this racial census thesis. The opposition parties, particularly the Democratic Party (DP) and the New National Party (NNP)[2] 'prioritized... issues in relation to how particular issues correlated to the interests of their specific racial and ethnic group support as revealed in opinion poll data' (Taylor and Hoeane 1999: 133-44). What this led to was the racialisation of issues and a politics of exclusion along the following lines: the concerns of white South Africans were perceived to be mainly crime, policing, and public order while those of the Indian and coloured communities were seen to be 'not being black enough' and as a result not enjoying the benefits of the democratic dispensation. Such views led the DP

to advance the slogan: 'Fight Back', which was indicative of the party's desire to roll back the democratic gains which had been achieved so far. The DP's slogan and campaign strategy racialised politics and entrenched minority fears about the implications of Black majority rule.

The outcome of the 1999 elections saw white opposition parties, in particular the DP, gain most of its votes from minority groups. The DP's performance led to the unseating of the NNP as the official opposition party in the National Assembly; it thereafter tactically positioned itself as the party of choice amongst conservative Afrikaner, English, Indian and coloured voters. But, was the appeal of the DP among these groups, and its lack of support within the black community, the result of racialised thinking within the electorate?

Contesting the race census thesis[3]

Significant empirical evidence from public opinion surveys conducted after the 1994, and in the run-up to the 1999 elections tended to indicate that the attitude of South Africa's electorate was contrary to that assumed by this race thesis. In February 1998 the Institute for Democracy in Southern Africa (IDASA) released its first Public Opinion Service (POS) Report, which suggested that the South African electorate might not be as rigid and stagnant in its attitude as is conventionally assumed. Arguing that the mainstream assumption 'is partly based on the fact that most surveys only focus on voting intentions', the POS report distinguished between 'voting intentions' and 'partisan identification', and investigated the two in three surveys conducted in 1994, 1995, and 1997. IDASA continued the study in a series of opinion polls for the 1999 general elections. The overall results of the seven surveys, reported in Table 1, indicated that the proportion of the electorate that strongly identified with a party fell from 88 percent in 1994 to 43 percent in October/ November 1998, and then climbed to 55 percent in April 1999. The number of independents increased from 12 percent in 1994 to 58 percent in October/ November 1998, but fell back to 45 percent in April 1999. As at April 1999, 35 percent of African voters, 76 percent of white voters, 63 percent of coloured voters, and 83 percent of Indian voters saw themselves as independents. These figures were significantly lower compared to those registered six months earlier, particularly in the case of African voters, when some 50 percent saw themselves as independents.

Table 1: Party identification

	Sept-Oct 1994	Sept-Oct 1995	June-July 1997	Sept 1998	Oct-Nov 1998	Feb-March 1999	April 1999
Yes	88	58	58	45	43	50	55
No	12	37	37	53	55	46	41
Don't Know	4	4	3	3	3	3	

Source: Helen Taylor, Robert Mattes & Cherrel Africa, 'Party Support and Voting Intention (1V)', Press Release, 24 May 1999, in http://www.idasa.org.za

The results also indicated, as is reflected in Table 2, that the proportion of the electorate that strongly identified with the ANC decreased from 58 percent in 1994 to 34 percent in October/November 1998, and increased to 44 percent in April 1999. The NNP's support in the same period decreased from 15 percent to 3 percent.

Table 2: Party Identification over time

	Sept-Oct 1994	Sept-Oct 1995	June-July 1997	Sept 1998	Oct-Nov 1998	Feb-March 1999	April 1999
ANC	58	37	40	35	34	40	44
NNP	15	9	6	3	3	3	3
IFP	5	5	4	2	2	2	2
FF	2	1	1	<1	<1	<1	1
DP	1	1	1	1	1	2	2
PAC	1	2	2	1	1	1	1
UDM	NA	NA	1*	1	1	1	1
Other	2	1	1	1	1	1	2
Won't Say/ Confidential	3	2	2	<1	<1	1	<1
Independent	12	42	42	56	58	50	45

Source: Helen Taylor, Robert Mattes and Cherrel Africa, 'Party Support and Voting Intention (1V)', Press Release, 24 May 1999, in http://www.idasa.org.za. * 1997 UDM figures refer to the combination of the scores for the National Consultative Forum (NCF) and the Process for a New Movement (PNM).

How do we explain the discrepancies between the electorate's party identification and voting intention, and what is the significance of the differences? The reduction in identification with the ANC and NNP between 1994 and 1999 suggests that these parties' electoral support is not as stable as was previously assumed. Support for the ANC among Blacks declined from 75 percent in 1994 to 45 percent in October/November 1998, and subsequently rose to 58 percent in April 1999. The NNP's support among whites dropped even more dramatically from 48 percent in 1994 to 5 percent in April 1999. The largest shift in voting patterns in both the African and white communities was in the direction of independent voters, with some 35 percent of Africans and 76 percent of whites declaring themselves as independents by April 1999. This fact, together with the slight drop in voting intentions for the ANC between 1994 and 1999 suggests that even though the electorate identified less with the ANC, it saw no serious alternative to it. As IDASA's Public Opinion Service report concluded, the stability in voting intentions was likely to continue in the short term; but the increase in the number of 'learners' and 'independents' created the potential for significant electoral shifts in the future.

Why, then, has this not happened? The primary reason for the lack of movement in this regard is that the major parliamentary opposition parties, because of their historical legacy and current election strategies, are identified with the interests of particular racial and. ethnic groups. Rather than developing an electoral programme that attracts the support of diverse communities, the election strategies and programmes of these parties have concentrated on appealing to narrow sections of the electorate. The IFP, for instance, projected itself as the defender and representative of the Zulu people. By so doing, it reduced its appeal for non-Zulu independents. The NNP and Democratic Party (DP),[4] historically seen as serving the interests of Afrikaner and English-speaking whites respectively, developed electoral strategies and programmes that targeted white, coloured, and Indian sections of the electorate. Furthermore, they denied themselves the opportunity to appeal to African voters who constitute, by far, the largest chunk of independent voters.

The racial census thesis can again be contested using evidence on voting patterns among the 'coloured' and 'Indian' electorate. Both groups of voters were the subject of much speculation in all three elections. The Indian and coloured voters were considered as a homogenous bloc, and therefore inclined to vote in clearly defined patterns. The most sophisticated expression of this view suggested that coloureds and Indians would be more comfortable voting for the DA, NNP, and Minority Front (MF) because of the need to 'secure their intermediate position in the racial hierarchy constructed by apartheid' (James, Calinguire and Cullinan 1996: 136) Accordingly, these parties played

Table 3: Voting Intention (%)

	Sept-Oct 1994	May-June 1995	Nov 1995	May-June 1996	Nov 1996	May-June 1997	Nov 1997	Mar 1998	July 1998	Sept-1998	Oct-Nov 1998	Feb-Mar 1999	April 1999
ANC	61	64	64	63	61	62	58	54	57	51	54	59	60
NNP	16	15	14	13	13	15	12	10	9	10	9	8	7
DP	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	5	6	7	5	6	7
IFP	5	2	3	5	6	4	5	5	5	4	5	4	3
PAC	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	1	1	1
UDM	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	4	5	5	2	3	2	2
FF	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1
FA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	+NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1
UCDP	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	>1	1	<1	1
ACDP	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	1	1	1
AZAPO	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
CP	<1	2	1	1	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	0
Other	<1	1	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	1	1
Don't know	12	10	8	11	11	12	12	16	14	21	19	17	15

Source: Helen Taylor, Robert Mattes & Cherrel Africa, 'Party Support and Voting Intention (1V)', Press Release, 24 May 1999, in http:/www.idasa.org.za.

the race and ethnic card in the hope of wining Indian and coloured voters to their side. The DA promised to defend Indian and coloured interests against African ones, while the MF and the NNP promised to make a deal with the African majority so as to get minority communities to share a piece of the national pie. This race game was also played by the ANC in both 1994 and 1999 when its electoral campaign was based on attempts to demonstrate that it was the best party to cater for Indian and coloured interests (defined as cultural interests). There is a section within the ANC that is still disposed to playing this game by constantly alluding to cultural and language concerns of Indian and coloured voters.

A study of the 'Indian' and 'coloured' vote in the 1999 election (see Habib and Naidu 1999: 189-199), however, showed that these parties' assumptions about the electorate of these communities were not valid. The study introduced 'social status' as a variable into the analysis, and thereby exposed the significant heterogeneity among Indian and coloured voters. Tables 4 and 5, which show electoral support for parties in the 1999 elections in selected suburbs and townships with high proportions of Indian and coloured voters, reveal distinct correlations between different income groups and voting behaviour. Areas where the majority of residents have a monthly household income below R2,500 were in most cases decisively won by the DP and NNP, while more affluent areas or communities were won by the ANC. The only exceptions to this trend were Heathfield in the Western Cape, Reservoir Hills in KwaZulu Natal and Laudium in Gauteng. The deviation from the norm, as shown in the latter two cases, can be partly explained by the fact that both suburbs have large informal settlements with predominantly black African populations, which increased the proportion of poorer residents and simultaneously inflated electoral support for the ANC. In any case, given the fact that the vast majority of coloured and Indian households receive incomes less than R2,500, it should not be surprising that class patterns of voting would appear as racial.

In a study of the 1994 elections in the Western Cape, Robert Mattes, Hermann Giliomee and Wilmot James identified significant correlations between party support and social status or income. The Market Opinion surveys were conducted between December 1993 and February 1994, and concluded that 'among coloured voters the NP turned out to be the party of the unemployed and underemployed, with the ANC doing its best among fully employed workers'. (Mattes, Giliomee and James 1996: 36) Based on data from a survey conducted by the Institute of Democracy in South Africa in 1995, Mattes (1995) arrived at similar conclusions. He noted that over 60 percent of coloured people who earned less than R1,599 identified with the NNP, while the ANC narrowly eclipsed the NNP among those coloured voters

earning in excess of R3, 500 per month. Also, 60 percent of Indian households with an income of less than R1,000 identified with the NNP, while the ANC surpassed the NNP with 38.4 percent of support among middle-class respondents.

Conventional wisdom suggests that workers and poorer classes in society would support parties to the left of the political spectrum, while the middle class and more affluent strata would support parties on the right. The reasons are obvious. While the former have a material interest in fundamentally changing the political and socio-economic arrangements of society, the latter prefer the status quo. In South Africa, the effect of this logic would mean tremendous working class support for the ANC while the DA and NNP would benefit from middle and upper class vote. In practice the more privileged classes vote for the ANC while the disadvantaged tend to vote for white minority parties – the DA and NNP.

How do we explain this paradox? It would appear that the reluctance of lower income Indian and coloured people to vote for the ANC stems from their material vulnerability in the post-apartheid economy. Attitudinal surveys have demonstrated that the concerns of the Indian working class are exactly the same as those of the African working class: unemployment, crime, and lack of access to housing, water, electricity and social welfare. But the point of departure is that unlike the African working class who are more optimistic about the material future, the Indian and coloured working class is far less confident.

Two sets of policies tend to inform these negative attitudes among Indian and coloured working class voters. The first is affirmative action. Indubitably, affirmative action is necessary to equalise the playing field and correct past discriminatory policies and practices. Yet it is perceived to impact adversely on the low-income groups within the Indian and coloured communities. It is argued that these groups have become vulnerable because of their low levels of skills, education and training, which make them easily expendable when companies and institutions are confronted with the challenge of improving their racial profile through affirmative action. By contrast, affirmative action policies have much less negative impact on upper income persons in the Indian and coloured communities in particular; because such individuals are either self-employed or have sufficiently higher levels of skills and training to make them indispensable. In fact, affirmative action policies in the 1990s have expanded the commercial and professional opportunities available to these groups, resulting in exponential increases in their private income and wealth since 1994.

The consequences of affirmative action have been compounded by the application of a neoliberal macroeconomic policy. Prior to 1994, the ANC

advocated an economic policy, which promised a state interventionist programme that would expand jobs, narrow the levels of economic inequality, and increase the poorer communities' access to the provision of social goods (housing, education, health etc). These promises were dropped when the government adopted a neoliberal economic policy (set out in the policy document called GEAR), which had the effect of increasing unemployment, reducing economic opportunities available to the poor, and creating a crisis in the delivery of social services to the poor. The impact has been that working class communities across the racial divide have been pitted against each other over the issue of access to the dwindling economic and social opportunities in the country. The Indian and coloured working class feel the most vulnerable, which accounts for their reluctance to vote for the ANC.

The policy alternatives that are offered by the parliamentary opposition appeal to sections of the White, coloured and Indian communities, especially the working class, who are reluctant to support the ANC because of their material vulnerability in the post-apartheid society which is being restructured through the simultaneous application of affirmative action and neoliberal economic policies. In the dominant market environment where the logic is unbridled competition, the political parties have resorted to playing the *swart gevaar* tactic, promising in their different ways to protect minority interests.

Explaining the 2004 electoral outcome

Have the results of the 2004 elections in any way undermined our argument against the race consensus thesis? As Table 6 shows, the ANC achieved an even more commanding lead with almost 70 percent of the support at the national level, becoming the largest party in all nine provinces. A further analysis of the 2004 election results provides additional evidence to repudiate the racial census thesis. We cite two pieces of evidence from the 2004 elections. First the 2004 elections saw the ANC make significant inroads into the Indian and coloured communities in KwaZulu Natal (KZN) and the Western Cape. It must be noted that the racial census thesis assumed that the communities reflecting a racialised group interest, would vote against what is perceived as a black ANC party. But statistics drawn from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) suggest that this was not the case. In Phoenix, a large working class Indian township which is on the outskirts of Durban, the ANC was the biggest winner; it increased its performance at the polls from 8.9 percent in 1999 to 25.4 percent in 2004. The DA, on the other hand, which had significant support in the area during the 1999 elections of 38.5 percent, only managed to capture one of the 31 voting districts in 2004.[5] Moreover, its overall support in the township fell from 38.5 percent to 25 percent. Similar trends were recorded in Chatsworth and other working class

'Indian' townships while the ANC consolidated its strength in more middle class 'Indian' suburbs where it always enjoyed support. In the Western Cape, a similar trend among the working class 'coloured' voters was recorded in favour of the ANC. The result is that the ANC remained the largest player in the province and, together with the NNP, constituted a comfortable majority there.

The second example, relates to the IFP. The IFP is, of course, a Zulu-based party appealing through Zulu nationalism for electoral support mainly in KZN. The outcome of the 2004 elections contradicts the view that the Zulus in KZN would vote overwhelmingly for the IFP. The ANC garnered more than 47 percent of the vote, which made it the largest single political party in KwaZulu Natal and further raised the spectre that the IFP, whose support base lies in the rural areas of the province, was a spent force. In any case, the elections show categorically that voter preferences in KZN were informed, as they were elsewhere in the country, by material and other national concerns; and not by race or tribe.

Conclusion

The dominant paradigm in political science in South Africa has, for much of post-apartheid history, explained political and electoral activity in racial terms. And this has informed the campaign strategies of many of the larger opposition parties. The foregoing analyses of attitudinal surveys as well as the 1994, 1999 and 2004 elections have established conclusively that the racial census thesis, as a paradigm for explaining the voting behavior of the South African electorate, is severely flawed. The indications are that significant sections of the electorate make rational choices during elections, and decide on the bases of information available to them. They are guided by such calculations to decide which party most closely represents their material and other interests.

This does not suggest that considerations of race do not play a role in South Africa's elections. It would be unreasonable to assume that they do not. But the link between racial/tribal identities and electoral behaviour is not strong enough. As long as opposition politicians do not recognise this, they will continue to make the mistake of basing their electoral campaigns on crude racial assumptions about the South Africa's electorate, resulting in failure to attract the support of a cross-section of the electorate. A weak opposition is bound to have negative consequences for the consolidation of democracy in the country. For, as long as there is no viable opposition party to keep the governing party on its toes, so long will the lines of accountability between state elites and the citizenry remain, at best, tenuous.

Notes

1. This paper was developed from two earlier articles; namely, Adam Habib and Sanusha Naidu: 'Election '99: Was there a 'Coloured' and 'Indian' Vote?', *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, November 1999 and Adam Habib and Rupert Taylor: 'Political Alliances and Parliamentary Opposition in Post-Apartheid South Africa', in *Democratization*, 2001.
2. The National Party renamed itself the New National Party in 1997 in the hope that such reinvention would shed is old apartheid image and enable it to garner more support among the electorate.
3. The following analysis is based on Adam Habib and Rupert Taylor (2001: 1).
4. In 2000 the DP formed an alliance with the NNP in order to consolidate their stance as the opposition. This coalition became known as the Democratic Alliance (DA).
5. Buddy Naidu, 2004, 'Why Indians ditched the DA?', *The Sunday Times Extra*, April 18.

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