

FLOORING THE CROSS?

Since 2003, the HSRC has annually conducted the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), asking a nationally representative sample of people aged 16 and older their views on, among other things, whether elected representatives should resign when they change parties.

BEN ROBERTS analyses the findings.

THE SEPTEMBER floor-crossing season is over, and political parties and analysts again had a field day, reinvigorating the debate on whether the floor-crossing legislation should be abolished.

But how do the constituents feel about the fact that the councillors, members of provincial legislatures (MPLs) and members of parliament (MPs) whom they have elected can walk over to a political party whose policies they do not support?

The SASAS data present an opportunity to study some of the predictions and critical sentiments levelled at the practice of floor-crossing. And particularly the view that it is undemocratic, since it distorts and undermines the interests of voters as expressed through democratic elections.

Over the four-year period from 2003-2006, between two-thirds and slightly more than three-quarters of the sample agreed with the view that elected politicians should resign when they change office (FIG 1). In addition, opposition to floor-crossing appears to be exhibiting a distinct upward trend, rising from 68% in late 2003 to 77% in late 2006.

Disapproval of floor-crossing has increased among all population groups, though to varying degrees (Figure 1). In 2003, the black African population was the most opposed (71%) to floor-crossing. There has been a small increase in aversion since then, with approximately three-quarters of this group voicing their disapproval by late 2006.

By contrast, the coloured population was largely unsure of floor-crossing in 2003 (with 51% declaring their disapproval and 19% undecided). There has nonetheless been a groundswell in opposition since (from 51% in 2003 to 79% in 2006). A similar trend is exhibited by white and Indian population groups, with opposition to floor-crossing rising from 63% to 87% over the period for the former, and from 63% to 80% for the latter.

With regard to party support, about three-quarters of ANC supporters express

disapproval towards floor-crossing, a figure that has remained reasonably constant over the period (Figure 2). Attitudes among Democratic Alliance (DA) supporters have fluctuated between 70% and 82% over the four years, while those aligned towards the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the Independent Democrats (ID) have become swiftly and resolutely disapproving of floor-crossing.

The inclusion of the New National Party may appear erroneous, but some respondents still list it as their party of choice, despite its dissolution and merger with the ANC in 2005. This group also expressed deep-seated and escalating concerns about the floor-crossing regime. Collectively, between 76% and 79% of supporters of the other smaller parties do not support the legislation.

Gender differences appear to be relatively insignificant over the period, with men and women almost equally averse to the notion of floor-crossing. A similar result is found in respect of age, with attitudes to floor-crossing for younger cohorts approximating those of older cohorts. All age groups generally demonstrate growing resistance, ranging in a 63% to 82% band over the four years.

As anticipated, there has been a dramatic upsurge in antipathy towards floor-crossing among the public in the two provinces that have been most affected during the window periods, namely, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. Through the practice of floor-crossing, the ANC assumed governance of the Western Cape for the first time, while making salient gains in representation relative to the IFP and DA in KwaZulu-Natal. Over the four survey rounds, opposition to floor-crossing rose 30 percentage points in KwaZulu-Natal (from 60% to 90%) and 28 percentage points in the Western Cape (from 57% to 85%).

In the other seven provinces, opposition to floor-crossing in 2006 ranged from 63% in Mpumalanga to 80% in the Eastern Cape. Declining opposition to floor-crossing is

evident among residents of Mpumalanga and the Free State, which may be related to the strong ANC support base in these provinces.

One issue often raised by political analysts in relation to the floor-crossing debate is the notion that it poses challenges for the health of our democracy. Examples include adverse influences on voter turnout, trust in Parliament and faith in politicians. Although empirical evidence to support these assertions still remains relatively limited, the SASAS data provide preliminary insight into the impact that floor-crossing is having on the attitudes of the voting public.

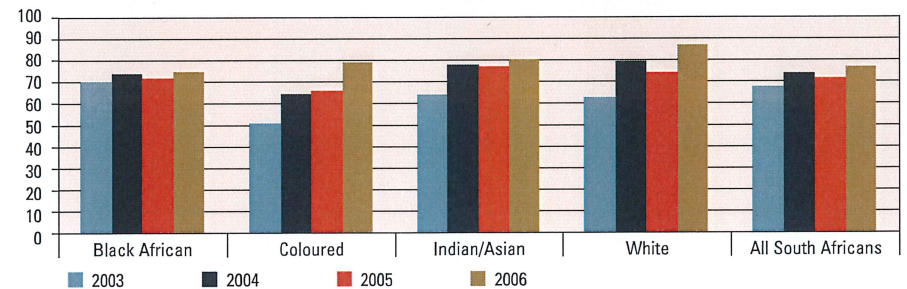
With regard to voter intention, the percentage of South Africans older than 18 indicating that they would not vote if there were a national election tomorrow has increased in recent years for both those opposed to and approving of floor-crossing.

Between 2004 and 2006, the percent indicating they would not vote more than doubled for those that disapprove of floor-crossing (from 6% to 13%), while the figure rose by two-thirds for supporters of the legislation (from 6% to 10%). More importantly, the gap in levels of apathy between the two groups has widened, from 0.2 percentage points in 2004 to three percentage points in 2006. While this difference should not be overexaggerated, it is significant in suggesting that floor-crossing is beginning to fuel voter apathy.

As for trust in Parliament, the results remain more inconclusive. Since 2004, trust in the institution has deteriorated for opposers to floor-crossing. Yet, the same trend is characteristic of supporters of floor-crossing between 2003 and 2005, to the extent that the levels of trust are virtually indistinguishable. The gap in levels of trust in Parliament narrowed consistently from 2003 to 2005. However, the 2006 results are substantively different, with parliamentary trust notably higher for supporters than detractors (67% versus 54%). We will have to wait to see whether this new pattern persists.



Figure 1: Disapproval of floor-crossing by population group, 2003–2006 (%)

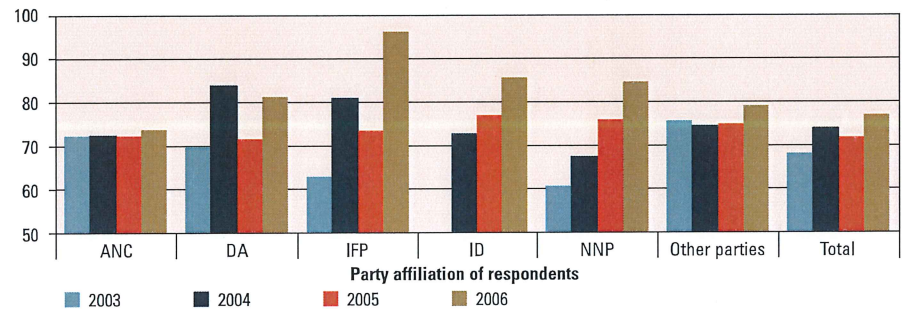


Finally, with regard to satisfaction with democracy, the trendlines for both floor-crossing supporters and detractors have again been moving in the same direction (Figure 3). For both groups, we observe a discernible decline in satisfaction since 2004. However, those who disapprove of floor-crossing tend to be consistently less satisfied than those that voice support. Floor-crossing therefore does appear to have a modest dampening effect on confidence in democracy.

At a discussion on electoral democracy in October, ANC spokesperson Smuts Nkonyama asserted: ‘Let the people speak... A general consensus position must be reached. If the majority of people say they don't want floor-crossing, [The] ANC is not married to any floor-crossing’ (IOL, 10.10.2007).

Judging by the overwhelming and mounting disaffection towards floor-crossing, it would seem that the people have decisively spoken. Although this aversion is demonstrably higher in provinces most affected by the outcomes of the floor-crossing windows, disapproval of the legislation is widely shared across population groups, party affiliation and age groups. A failure to respond to this demand is likely to further enhance the risk of voter apathy and alienation among parts of the electorate. Therefore, in adherence with the Freedom Charter’s vision that ‘The People Shall Govern’, it is hoped that

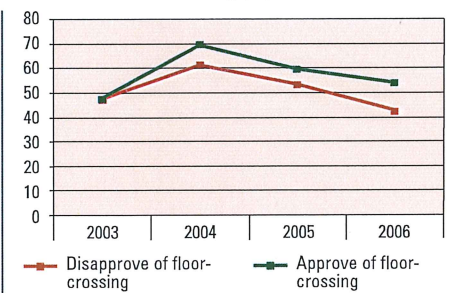
Figure 2: Disapproval of floor-crossing by party affiliation, 2003–2006 (%)



political parties will reflect on the empirical observations reported above as they continue to engage each other on options pertaining to the future of floor-crossing. ●

Ben Roberts is a research specialist in the Urban, Rural and Economic Development research programme.

Figure 3: Satisfaction with democracy, by support of floor-crossing (%)



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TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP
Gone and forgotten?

