



Politikon

South African Journal of Political Studies

ISSN: 0258-9346 (Print) 1470-1014 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cpsa20>

Editorial: Quo Vadis? Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections

Joleen Steyn Kotze & Narnia Bohler-Muller

To cite this article: Joleen Steyn Kotze & Narnia Bohler-Muller (2019) Editorial: Quo Vadis? Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections, Politikon, 46:4, 365-370, DOI: [10.1080/02589346.2019.1692520](https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2019.1692520)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2019.1692520>



Published online: 26 Nov 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Editorial: Quo Vadis? Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections

The 2019 General Elections marked a watershed in South Africa's political landscape. The ANC under the banner of a narrative of *regeneration* and *getting back on the moral path* dipped below the 60% mark for the first time in South Africa's democratic history. Just a mere three years before the General Elections, the ANC suffered punishing losses in the 2016 Local Government Elections where the party lost power in three major South African municipalities, that of Tshwane, Johannesburg, and Nelson Mandela Bay. The party only managed to secure 55.68% of the vote in this election compared to 63.65% in the 2011 Local Government Elections (IEC 2016, 2011).

This decline in electoral support for the party may be interpreted as a degeneration of the ANC through the loss of its moral stature, the erosion of its integrity and disillusionment with its performance as a governing party.¹ It could also potentially signal the decline of party dominance, an enduring characteristic of South Africa's democratic political system. The procedural integrity of South Africa's democracy has been undermined by an increase in corruption,² a lack of accountability³ extending to lower levels of government where state resources have been used to fund party paraphernalia during Local Government Elections in some municipalities⁴, demonstrating that the line between party and state has become increasingly blurred.

As South Africa marks 25 years of democracy, one cannot ignore that the *Dream of '94* (Steyn-Kotze 2017) remains elusive for ordinary South Africans. South Africa remains a highly divided society, in terms of class, race and gender. Two seemingly enduring legacies of apartheid characterise the socio-political realities of today: the seeming permanence of apartheid-constructed socio-political identities, and the concentration of poverty amongst the black African population. In assessing progress made towards achieving a non-racial, non-sexist South Africa, the ANC (2012) noted, 'a major policy weakness in the last 18 years has been a failure to significantly transform the colonial industrial structure and ownership of the economy'. This lack of transformation is rooted in the view that the implementation of its policy agenda has not sufficiently delivered on the vision of South Africa as captured in the Freedom Charter. In the 2019 General Elections campaign, issues of economic redress through a narrative of (radical economic) transformation, land redistribution, and a commitment to economic justice dominated the electoral narrative and messaging in political parties' electoral campaigns.

The run-up to the 2019 General Elections campaign was characterised by factionalism within the ANC that culminated with the reluctant resignation of Jacob Zuma as president of the country. In what can be seen as yet another *battle for the soul of the ANC*, the 2018 ANC Elective Conference marked a turning point for the party. In highly contested internal party leadership elections, Cyril Ramaphosa rose to become the new ANC president. He campaigned on the promise of a new dawn, a return to moral stature, and a need to regain the trust of ordinary South Africans following Zuma's *nine wasted years*. Under Ramaphosa's leadership, the ANC had daunting task a mere five months before South Africans went to the polls; rebuilding trust in the ANC brand with Cyril Ramaphosa as the face of the campaign to *get South Africa back on track* under his presidency.

Similarly, South Africa's largest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance succumbed to factional politics, most notably in the City of Cape Town, the proverbial crown jewel in the its electoral narrative of good governance and the delivery of social and economic goods to *create a better life* for all South Africans (Prevost, Steyn-Kotze, and Wright 2014). Internal party politics saw a breakdown in the relationship between City of Cape Town mayor, Patricia De Lille, who became increasingly vocal on issues of corruption. Further tensions arose as *party bosses* sought to entrench control of the DA to the detriment of free expression and debate on the political and policy trajectory of the political party, and a seemingly embedded culture of racism that effectively silenced, excluded, and undermined black leadership – and the rise of black leadership – in the party. Following a very public internal battle, 'Aunty Pat' left the DA to create the GOOD Party to contest the 2019 General Elections, similar to the birth of her Independent Democrats fifteen years earlier. This move divided the support base the DA counted on to increase their share of the vote in the 2019 General Elections. And, in a surprise turn of events, the conservative Freedom Front Plus rose to become the fourth largest party in Parliament. Many speculate the uncertainty around land coupled with the internal dynamics of the DA, saw the conservative vote find a new political home in this electoral season. However, the re-emergence of Helen Zille and the exit of Mmusi Maimane as the leader of the DA could lead to a return to the fold of those voters lost to the FF+, but may also lead to an exodus of progressive black voters who are seeking a new political home.

The EFF went to the polls under a banner of controversy, most notably around the VBS scandal, regarded as the *most unsophisticated bank heist* (Mantshantsha 2018). Key allegations centre around family members of the EFF's leaders, most notably Julius Malema and Floyd Shivambu, who are said to have received approximately R20 million (Mantshantsha 2018).

In addition to alleged personal benefit EFF leadership capitalised on from the VBS looting scandal, it emerged that

... the ANC fired 14 mayors in municipalities across Limpopo and the North West for allegedly instructing officials to deposit municipal funds with the bank (illegally). Some municipalities lost as much as R234m as VBS ran out of cash and went into business rescue in March. In Gauteng, the ANC is said to be pressuring two mayors to resign, as it is illegal to deposit municipal funds with a mutual bank. The ANC has also had to admit it benefited to the tune of more than R2m in sponsorships by Vele and VBS, which hired buses to ferry members to its December 2017 elective conference.

The EFF dismissed the VBS scandal as 'propoganda' (Head 2018), and went to the polls under the populist banner of jobs and land (now!). It would seem that the VBS scandal did not diminish the electoral performance of the party as the EFF was the only political party, second to the Freedom Front Plus, to increase its share of the vote from just over 6% in 2014 to almost 11% in 2019.

Central issues that characterised the 2019 General Elections campaign were job creation, economic reinvigoration to create a vibrant economy, unemployment reduction, poverty alleviation and eradication, land redistribution, the combating of corruption, and restoring trust in political parties, government institutions and to some extent, democracy itself. This particular election came at a time where South Africa faced multiple challenges: a stagnant economy; the increasing politicisation of race; protests around the delivery of basic services; increased corruption and a flagrant lack of accountability (most notably under the Zuma Administration); and pressure to restore investor and international confidence in the future developmental trajectory of South Africa. This election, for us, signalled the first time the ANC could no longer rely solely on their rich liberation history. Citizens were no longer interested in rhetoric, but wanted to see concrete socio-economic change for the better. There is no doubt that party loyalty will not necessarily remain the deciding factor in future elections as South Africans become more *issue based voters*.

In this special issue we consider the fate of South Africa's electoral democracy. What lessons can we tease out from the 2019 General Elections; the campaign, voter turn-out, electoral behaviour, the construction and meaning of land, the decline in voter participation, protest and voting choices, lessons we can draw from coalitions moving forward, and our unique approach to 'electing' a president. We engage the question *quo vadis South Africa*, with a focus on South Africa's electoral democracy and its future.

Cherrel Africa considers a very important, but often neglected question in South African electoral politics: Do campaign matter? She argues that in a one-party dominant context, such as that of South Africa, political parties campaign fiercely, but given the racialised nature of electoral politics, voters may not necessarily be seen as active participants when political parties campaign. They are '... guided primarily by symbolic or identity concerns ...', a view that is strongly challenged, as Africa notes. Examining the campaigning strategies of the ANC, the DA, the IFP and the NP (before its eventual demise in 2004) since the birth of democracy, Africa concludes that political parties need high levels of credibility to perform at the polls, but, consistency in their political message over time and internal party dynamics also matters. In answering whether campaigns do matter in a South African electoral context, she notes the complex interplay between interparty political dynamics, context, the crux of the party's campaign message when engaging voters, and how voters perceive political leaders and the party. She concludes that South African '... voters emerge as active agents consuming relevant political information ...', and as such, '... we should pay far more attention to the quality of choices offered to voters via campaigns ... [especially] the extent to which they provide voters with the basis to make informed choices and scrutinise the conditions under which campaigns enhance the quality of democracy'.

We often draw a correlation between what Booyesen (2007, 2012) constructs as the *ballot and the brick* to engage the tension between protesting and voting in explaining the ANC's continued electoral dominance. Runciman, Bekker, and Maggot revisit this important question, which is built on the assumption that protest becomes another means of political engagement for ANC supporters, who whilst protesting against the governing party, will continue to vote for the party because of political loyalty. Runciman *et. al.* demonstrate, however, that the ANC has suffered electoral loss when protest activity has increased, and that party loyalty may be a less binding factor to sustained electoral support. Importantly, Runciman *et. al.* demonstrate that while the ANC '... remains a party of choice ...' for voters who had and had not engaged in protests, '... opposition parties are, to a greater extent, characterised by voting protestors'.

Perhaps one of the most emotive issues in post-apartheid South Africa is that of land. Indeed, most political parties launched their campaign with either land as the key focus of their messaging or as an important discursive component in the campaign narrative. In their article, Bank and Hart engage land as belonging and place-making in contemporary South Africa. Drawing on an anthropological perspective, Bank and Hart demonstrate that political messaging political parties use in constructing land reform does not necessarily resonate with the electorate. Land and its meaning is complex, and as such, Bank and Hart conclude that one cannot debate land as development without engaging the meaning of land and place-making for people. This may go some way to explaining why, despite the loud political and media rhetoric, citizens are not as concerned about land as they are about unemployment, crime and corruption (South African Social Attitudes Survey).

Following the 2016 Local Government Elections, commentary on coalition government and cooperation between political parties emerged as a key scholarly conversation. This is not surprising given that none of the parties could attain an outright majority in three key metropolitan municipalities, that of Tshwane, Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela Bay. The DA was able to form coalition governments in these three metropolises, but not without much instability and,

at times, administrative and political paralysis in the local councils. Khambule, Nomdo, Siswana, and Fokou provide a compelling analysis of coalition politics at local government level and expand on lessons learned. Central to their analysis is the strategies opposition parties use in structuring coalitions and informal partnerships as a means of coexistence to challenge the politically dominant position of the ANC. Khambule *et. al.* conclude that if the possibility of a national coalition government arises in future General Elections, consensus-based governance needs to be characteristic of political cooperation between political parties. If opposition parties are unable to draw on coexistence as a political strategy to challenge ANC electoral dominance, subsequent political paralysis could undermine accountability.

The 2019 General Elections saw political parties use the faces of their leaders to entice the electorate to cast their vote for the leader *as president*, most notably Ramaphosa, Maimane and Malema. Kotze provides a timely analysis of South Africa's unique approach to 'electing' a president. He rightly notes that research on the role of the president in South Africa is severely limited, and as such, given the 2019 election campaign that called for South Africans to *elect their president*, Kotze demonstrates that a *president is elected* not by the electorate, but rather by the internal party dynamics and a balance of power between political parties in Parliament. The Constitution guides all of these processes of a representative democracy. For Kotze, the electoral system shapes the relationship between the executive and the legislature, giving Parliament substantial power that shapes '... a relationship of direct presidential accountability to Parliament and gives an unusually strong combination of powers to Parliament to remove the President from office'. In addition, Kotze demonstrates that opposition parties tended to compete for the role of the Speaker in Parliament as opposed to the presidency because '... a symbiotic relationship exists between their party position and government positions'. Kotze concludes that while there may be an appetite to elect the South African presidential directly, it could potential undermine the oversight role Parliament plays over the Executive; '... thereby making the President less accountable and more powerful'. A number of experts, however, are calling for electoral reform to enable more direct accountability to constituencies.

Voter apathy, a politically disengaged youth, and voter abstention proved an issue of great concern in the 2019 General Elections. Many reasons are proffered to explain the decline in voter participation in General and Local Government Elections. These range from disillusionment due to anorexic service delivery to a lack of trust in political parties, which has been declining over the past 25 years. These issues, coupled with an increasingly disengaged electorate, proved the outcome of the 2019 General Elections to be less predictable than in the past. In previous elections, the outcome was generally premised on the view of *by how much the ANC would win*. Following the 2016 Local Government Election and the ANC's sharp electoral decline, the outcome of the 2019 General Election focused on the question of *whether or by what margin the ANC would win*.

Schulz-Herzenberg engages the question of electoral uncertainty in her contribution focussing on the decline of partisanship in South Africa. She demonstrates that a decline in partisan support over the last 25 years contributed to the uncertainty that shaped electoral behaviour in the 2019 General Elections. An increase in abstention, voters shifting their vote to another party, vote splitting, and late vote decisions, were key indicators of '... shrinkage in partisan loyalties ...', which culminated in an unpredictability. This unpredictability was shaped by more short-term political concerns as opposed to '... long-standing, traditional party loyalties'.

Similarly, Roberts, Struwig, Gordon, and Davids engage voter turn-out and disengagement that was particularly pronounced in the 2019 General Elections. They interrogate factors that may impact on voter behaviour of decided voters, abstainers, and undisclosed and undecided voters. Partisan political attachment emerged as a key motivator to get voters to the polls, and party attachment and feelings of closeness to a political ideology do indeed matter in

motivating voters to cast a vote. However, feeling close to a political party is not the *only* motivator to go to the polls. Other factors include a sense of civic duty, interest in politics, and a perceptions of efficacy. Indeed, Roberts *et. al.* conclude that ‘compared to decided voters, abstainers are less interested in politics, less convinced that their vote makes a difference or that the elected are responsive to their needs, and possess a weaker sense of moral obligation to vote’.

Another compounding factor that impacts on voter turn-out is age, and as Roberts *et. al.* show, younger voters are less motivated to cast their votes. South Africa’s electoral democracy will be negatively affected by continued disengagement: ‘... if indecision combines with a mounting sense of psychological disengagement, there remains a real possibility that this could fuel the rising tendency towards electoral abstention in future’. Race continues to play a prominent role in voter behaviour, but age and educational attainment also matter as Roberts *et. al.* demonstrate. In looking towards electoral participation in the future, the authors conclude that questions of political efficacy, trust and accountability will shape the development of political culture and significantly impact on South Africa’s electoral future.

The 2019 General Elections proved to be a turning point in the country’s electoral history. There is a real possibility that we see the beginning of the decline of a dominant ANC in the electoral playing field. However, this does not mean that opposition political parties are able to capitalise on the declining support for the ANC. Instead of casting a vote for opposition parties, voters abstain from participating in elections. This could be related to the political messaging and campaign rhetoric that the opposition draws on in order to entice voters to cast a ballot for them. Yet, it would appear that campaign rhetoric and political messaging do not necessarily resonate with the political intentions or views of South Africa’s electorate. Simply put, how effective are political parties in capturing a disillusioned voter? It is indeed time to reflect on South Africa’s democratic journey. This issue is the first step towards looking at some key dynamics that shaped *Elections 2019*. However, there are some caveats. How do we explain the increase of support for the populist EFF in the midst of a major corruption scandal? Do the internal factional battles of the DA that impacted on their electoral performance show us that the official opposition may now be a party in search of an identity? Has the ANC outlived its ability to capitalise on its liberation credentials? How will our electoral democracy progress? Will we follow a path of apathy that opens the space for populist politics as seen in other countries?

Quo Vadis South Africa?

Notes

1. Afrobarometer time series demonstrates that trust in the ANC remains precarious. One quarter of South Africans in 2002 did not trust the ruling party at all. By 2018, this sentiment increased to 36%. When compared to data on whether South Africans trust the president, one notes a correlation between decline in trust for the ruling party and trust in the president. In 1999 37% of South Africans indicated a measure of trust in the president, and by 2018 only 30% said they trusted the president a little. Of interest is that in 1999 15% of South Africans did not trust the president at all. By 2018 27% of South Africans expressed this sentiment (See Afrobarometer 2019a, 2019b).
2. There have been various corruption scandals in South Africa’s democratic history. The most notorious scandal is government spending in excess of R200 million on upgrades to former President Zuma’s Nkandla homestead which included a swimming pool and an amphitheatre. The Zondo Commission, a judicial commission of enquiry, is currently investigating allegations of state capture and fraud in the public sector (<https://www.sastatecapture.org.za>). This commission’s mandate is to ‘inquire, make findings, report on, and make recommendations ...’

following the former Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela's report entitled *State of Capture*, which investigated

... complaints of alleged improper and unethical conduct by the president [Jacob Zuma] and other state functionaries relating to alleged improper relationships and involvement of the Gupta family in the removal and appointment of ministers and directors of State Owned Entities resulting in improper and possibly corrupt award of state contracts and benefits to the Gupta family's businesses. (Public Protector 2016)

3. Many municipalities and departments are unable to achieve a clean audit status. The Auditor-General regularly finds evidence of maladministration, irregular spending, and wasteful expenditure. It has also become common practice for government tenders to be awarded to companies in which government officials have a direct stake and as such are able to unduly benefit. This has now become known as 'tenderpreneurship'. Key issues highlighted by the Auditor General include corruption, poor leadership, and unqualified and incompetent officials who occupy key leadership position (Nombembe 2012).
4. See <http://www.heraldlive.co.za/metro-pays-for-anc-items>.

References

- Afrobarometer. 2019a. "Trust in the Ruling Party." Accessed January 12, 2019. <http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online>.
- Afrobarometer. 2019b. "Trust in the President." Accessed January 12, 2019. <http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online>.
- ANC. 2012. "A Second Transition? Building a National Democratic Society and a Balance of Forces." Accessed May 13, 2016. <http://www.anc.org.za/docs/discus/2012/transition.pdf>.
- Head, T. 2018. "EFF Responds to Allegations That They Looted R1.8 Million from VBS Bank." Accessed November 4, 2019. <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/eff-response-vbs-bank-scorpio/>.
- IEC. 2011. "Results Summary 2011 Local Government Elections: All Ballots." Accessed September 1, 2017. <http://www.elections.org.za/content/LGEPublicReports/197/Detailed%20Results/National.pdf>.
- IEC. 2016. "Results Summary – All Ballots: 2016 Local Government Elections." Accessed September 2, 2017. <http://www.elections.org.za/content/LGEPublicReports/402/Detailed%20Results/National.pdf>.
- Mantshantsha, S. 2018. "Scandal of the Year: VBS – a Most Unsophisticated Bank Heist." *Business Day Online*, December 21. Accessed November 4, 2019. <https://www.businesslive.co.za/fm/features/cover-story/2018-12-21-scandal-of-the-year-vbs--a-most-unsophisticated-bank-heist/>.
- Prevost, G., J. Steyn-Kotze, and B. Wright. 2014. "The Battle for the Bay: The 2011 Local Government Elections in the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality." *Politikon* 41 (1): 59–83.
- Public Protector. 2016. "The State of Capture: A Report of the Public Protector." Accessed January 30, 2019. <http://saflii.org/images/329756472-State-of-Capture.pdf>.
- Steyn-Kotze, J. 2017. *Delivering an Elusive Dream of Democracy: Lessons from Nelson Mandela Bay*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.
- Susan, Booyesen 2007. "With the Ballot and the Brick: The Politics of Service Delivery in South Africa." *Progress in Development Studies* 7 (1): 21–32.
- Susan, Booyesen. 2012. "The Ballot and the Brick' Enduring but Under Duress." In *Local Elections in South Africa: People, Parties, Politics*, edited by Susan Booyesen. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.

Joleen Steyn Kotze
*Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery Research Programme, Human Science Research
 Council, Pretoria, South Africa
 Centre for Gender and African Studies, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa*
 jkotze@hsrc.ac.za, steynkotzej@ufs.ac.za

Narnia Bohler-Muller
*Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery Research Programme, Human Science Research
 Council, Pretoria, South Africa
 Centre for Gender and African Studies, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa*